Opposing Conceptions of the Audience: The Active and Passive Hemispheres of Mass Communication Theory

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Working the definitions, ideologies, and implications of the concepts of active and passive audiences, Biocca uses the research literature to demonstrate that the active audience position is overextended and often trivial. He removes the locus of control from both the media and the individual and places it in the center of physiological, psychological, social, and semiotic structures.

At the very center of mass communication research there lies a fundamental dichotomy, a split between opposite conceptions of the mass communication process and its audience. In one of its many forms, it permeates a number of theoretical and methodological debates.

Over the last 40 years of theory and research, a kind of theoretical tug-of-war has emerged. On one end of the rope we find the active audience: individualistic, “impervious to influence,” rational, and selective. On the other end, we have the passive audience: conformist, gullible, anomic, vulnerable, victims. Huffing and tugging at each end is an assorted lot of key media theorists championing their perception of the social reality.

Mass communication theory’s simultaneous embrace of both conceptions frames many of the questions we ask about the sociopolitical role of the media, the audience member’s cognitions of self and “reality,” as well as the moment-to-moment cognitive processes by which the individual decodes media content and form. What are the limits of individual intellectual freedom in the face of the institutions for the dissemination of information and

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ideology? Are these institutions vehicles for social conformism or bearers of liberating knowledge?

Such questions call out for a theoretical analysis of the fundamental epistemological assumptions that guide, and sometimes mislead, our research on the nature of the mass media and their audiences. Because of the central importance of this amorphous active-passive dichotomy in mass communication theory, this chapter will:

(1) establish and analyze the theoretical components of the concepts of activity and of the "active audience";
(2) trace the intellectual origins of the original concept of audience passivity and vulnerability and the "reaction" it engendered;
(3) critique the implications of the concept of audience activity for cognitive and social theory and research; and, finally,
(4) make some proposals for the clarification and, it is hoped, the advancement of research in this area.

**WHAT IS AUDIENCE “ACTIVITY”?**

For the uses and gratifications “paradigm,” the concept of the active audience is a key player on a sometimes disorganized chess board of theories, beliefs, and conceits. Theorists in this paradigm insist that this “most basic tenet” (Swanson, 1979, p. 41) of audience activity “is important” (Rouner, 1984, p. 173), "constitutes one of the essential underpinnings of the approach" (Palmgreen, 1984), and is “fundamental to the study of mass communication effects in general, and central to the uses and gratifications approach in particular” (Levy, 1983, p. 109). For some observers, active audience theory may itself be “a new dominant paradigm in effects research” (Hawkins & Pingree, 1982, 1986). Even among some of the critics of uses and gratifications, the concept of audience activity constitutes “a decided gain over the psychological assumptions underpinning the older research tradition” (Carey & Kreiling, 1974), which “we should applaud” (Swanson, 1979, p. 41).

One of the strengths and, simultaneously, one of the weaknesses of the construct is its “extraordinary range of meanings” (Blumler, 1979, p. 13). It is both cognitive and sociostructural, normative and objective, socially variable yet innate. The various qualitative forms of the concept exist within a temporal dimension as well. Like media consumption behavior, activity is said to exist prior to media use (“preactivity”), during media use (“duractivity”), and following media use (“postactivity”) (Blumler, 1979; Levy, 1983; Levy & Windahl, 1984a, 1984b).

It has become clear that this literature has given birth to a protean and infinitely malleable meta-construct that is “undeniably complex and multidimensional” (Palmgreen, Wenner, & Rosengren, 1985). Each facet purports to define an intangible and relative process called “activity.” Even though the concept has been used extensively in much mass communication theory and
research for over a decade, one still finds theorists who dodge an adequate theoretical exposition of the term *activity*, apologizing, for example, that "the concept of activity is not easily defined" (Rubin, 1986, p. 293). Before examining the whole, let us first dissect the parts in search of an underlying structure. What follows is an attempt faithfully to structure descriptors used in the definitions and research into the concept of activity (Blumler, 1979; Levy & Windahl, 1984a, 1985; Palmgreen, Wenner, & Rosengren, 1985; Rubin, 1984).

- **Audience activity as "selectivity":**

  Grounded in the theories of selective attention, perception, and retention (Klapper, 1960), audience activity is portrayed as the funneling process of media, program, and content selection (Heeter, D'Allessio, Greenberg, & McVoy, 1983). In the uses and gratifications literature, the term *selectivity* is most often used to denote selective exposure (Levy, 1983, p. 110). But there has been a recent attempt to expand the concept into the areas of selective perception and selective retention (recall) (Levy & Windahl, 1985).

- **Audience activity as "utilitarianism"**

  In an extension of the concept of selectivity, theorists using this facet of the concept emphasize the *utility* of the process of choice. The audience member is the embodiment of the self-interested consumer. Beyond mere selectivity, which in some cases implies a certain defensiveness on the part of the audience, the utilitarian version of the concept suggests a certain level of rational choice in the satisfaction of clear individual needs and motives (Dervin, 1980; Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974; Levy, 1983; Palmgreen, 1984; Palmgreen & Rayburn, 1985).

- **Audience activity as "intentionality"**

  It is in this form that the concept emphasizes the more cognitive dimensions of activity. Intentionality points to schematic processing and structuring of incoming information (Fiske & Kinder, 1980; Garramone, 1983; Planalp & Hewes, 1979; Swanson, 1979). Media consumption and attention are said to be schema driven. Patterns of consumption and memory bear the clear imprint of the audience member's motivation, personality, and individual cognitive processing structure (McGuire, 1974; Wenner, 1985).

- **Audience activity as "involvement"**

  According to Hawkins and Pingree (1986), "cognitive effort" has become the focus of methodological and theoretical debate. Levy (1983) uses the label "involvement" to characterize both the level of "affective arousal" and a level of cognitive organization and information structuring. The same activity term is further used to label behavioral manifestations of active "involvement," such as parasocial interaction (e.g., "talking back" to the television).
Audience activity as "imperviousness to influence"

Though the phrase “imperviousness to influence” is identified with Bauer (1964a), this facet of “activity” can be cited as the sociopolitical “bottom line” of the concept. It clearly is for many writers part of the underlying “effect” of activity on the process of mass communication. For other writers, “impervious to influence” functions as a kind of goal of activity by reference to the degree to which the audience limits, influences, and controls the effects of media.

This activity is sometimes portrayed as subversive of communicator goals and intentions. Using examples of failed information campaigns drawn from the body of limited effects research, Dervin (1980) has joined with others in extending this dimension of the concept into a phenomenological individualism emphasizing idiosyncratic decodings of “information.”

Though this typology of the forms of the concept reveals the breadth of its use, it is clear that the various facets of the concept are not orthogonal (see Rosengren, 1985). They overlap, some potentially consuming the others. Each has emerged piecemeal after the concept, according to active audience theorists, was accepted as an “article of faith” (Blumler, 1979; Palmgreen et al., 1985).

What also seems to be missing is the unknown core of the concept. Rosengren (1985) notes that it is “paradoxical that one of the central concepts of a research tradition should have remained unexamined for such a long time” (p. 276). Levy and Windahl (1985) echo his concern: “Despite its centrality to mass communication theory, however, the notion of audience activity has received little conceptual development or direct study” (p. 110; see also Windahl, 1981; Rubin, 1986).

Why has the concept of activity remained unexamined? The fact that the theorists of the active audience have called it an “article of faith” reveals a sense of ideological commitment. (Here using ideology as the basic intellectual structure underlying one’s thinking.) This ideological commitment is laced with liberal democratic ideals of individual rationality, independence, and “self-possession.”

The source of the active audience stance can be surmised from the independence cry resonating from the notion of “imperviousness to influence.” To understand and fully analyze the concept of active audience and the research agenda it has engendered, we must appreciate its intellectual origins.

BAUER’S INDEPENDENCE CRY, “IMPERVIOUSNESS TO INFLUENCE”

The creator of the phrases “imperviousness to influence” and the “obstinate audience,” which later became euphemistically translated to the “active
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audience," is the social psychologist Raymond Bauer (1963, 1964a, 1964b; Bauer & Bauer, 1960). Bauer (1964b) is almost universally cited among uses and gratifications theorists and critics as the author of this declaration of audience independence (Blumler, 1979; Blumler, Gurevitch, & Katz, 1985; Carey & Kreiling, 1974; Dervin, 1980; Elliott, 1974; Levy, 1983; Levy & Windahl, 1984a, 1985; McGuire, 1974; McLeod & Becker, 1974, 1981; McQuail, 1983; McQuail & Gurevitch, 1974; Palmgreen, 1984; Pingree & Hawkins, 1982; Weibull, 1985; Wenner, 1985). For these theorists, Bauer's article is a milestone in a purported "paradigm shift" from "administrative" approaches to more receiver-oriented research perspectives.

Bauer's mission is clearly signaled in the first paragraphs of his article. He quotes Isidor Chein (1962):

The opening sentence of Ethical Standards of Psychologists is that "the psychologist is committed to a belief in the dignity and worth of the individual human being."... But what kind of dignity can we attribute to a robot? (p. 31)

Bauer was decrying the temperament of a decade when Skinnerians held court in psychology departments and the Cassandras of mass culture theory bickered and warned that mass media had brought Pavlovian conformism into the home via TV. Mass communication theorists joined with like-minded colleagues in psychology and sociology to rescue the abstract individual. In this classic article, the media, led by advertising and social scientific institutions, are pitted against the individual armed only with his or her good sense and "obstinate" psyche.

Framed within almost mythic terms, Bauer puts forward a version of the passive and active dichotomy. A model of "one-way influence" (the passive audience), which Bauer associates with an odd alliance of exploitative communicators and mass culture critics, is pitted against a model that is couched in the language of the marketplace, a "transactional model." Here "exchanges are equitable" and "each party expect(s) to get his money's worth" (pp. 319, 320).

Bauer was attempting to retrieve not only the individual but the image of the individual, which lies at the heart of classic liberal democracy: the ideal independent citizen who is rational, self-determining, and freely pursuing life, liberty, and property. This model of the individual was threatened by social critics who pointed out that in a society where mass production and mass-produced consensus were king and queen, democracy was illegitimate.

It is clear in this article that Bauer's primary impetus for the "active audience" model is a moral one. He writes, "The issue is not...the findings of social science. The real issue is whether our social model of man—the model we use for running society—and our scientific model or models—the one we use for running subjects—should be identical" (p. 319).
THE SPECTER OF THE "PASSIVE" AUDIENCE

The tone of urgency in this early version of the debate revealed that the active audience theorists implicitly shared a belief in the possibility of the fully realized passive audience model—the Orwellian specter of a truly "mass society." Often depicted in terms of the extreme stereotype of mass society theorists (Durkheim, 1893/1964; LeBon, 1893; Reisman, 1950), the passive audience is grey, uniform, anomic, faceless, gullible, and defenseless against the power of the propagandist. This sociological myth is in some ways a pastiche of images generated by the media themselves. Mass-disseminated images are retrieved of masses screaming in unison at 1930s Nuremberg rallies, farmers running out of their homes during Orson Welles’s “War of the Worlds,” millions of faceless consumers salivating for the mass-produced good life. These are referents for the labels and stereotypes of mass entertainment and public opinion surveys. In the recent literature, an audience researcher acknowledges and perpetuates the myth of the passive audience with her characterization of a “global priesthood” with "non-selective" and “habitual” viewing habits (Rouner, 1984, p. 168). The mass waits vulnerable and irrational.

For the contemporaries of Bauer who subscribed to the passive audience image, the mass production of messages presented a certain illusion (Anders, 1957). Everywhere, the TV image and the newspaper page were exactly the same. Everywhere, there was a similarity of form. The exact same physical image could be seen in the subway, in the newspaper, in the home. From this illusion came the leap claiming that the exact same physical message produced its exact likeness in the consciousness of the audience. The result seemed equally obvious. The mass production process had evolved into the assembly line of the mind (Van den Haag, 1957).

The theory of the passive audience was not merely a phase in the history of mass communication theory. It lives on in many of our assumptions and fears about the effects of mass communication. “Cultivation” theory (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1980, 1986) is one of the inheritors of the passive audience tradition. Gerbner et al. (1986) write:

People are born into a symbolic environment with television as its mainstream. . . . Television viewing is both a shaper and stable part of certain lifestyles and outlooks. It links the individual to a larger if synthetic world, a world of television’s own making. . . . The content shapes and promotes . . . dominates their sources of information, continued exposure to its messages is likely to reiterate, confirm, and nourish (i.e., cultivate) their values and perspectives. (pp. 23ff.)

The notion of the “passive” audience has evolved a great deal in this newer “mainstreamed” model. But in it we find the spirit of the “passive audience”
tradition, the fear of the rise of mass society, now a gray and slow-moving “mainstream.”

In the course of the development of mass communication theory, there were a number of possible reactions to the specter of mass society. The strident if sometimes hollow claims of radical individualism visible in the “alternative” culture of the 1960s were one response. Another approach was to question the validity of certain notions of “mass society.” For active theorists, this often involved denying the ascendancy of the mass in mass communication. Blumler (1979), a leading exponent of uses and gratifications theory, notes that this school has “always been strongly opposed to mass audience terminology as a way of labelling the collectivities that watch TV shows, attend movies, and read magazines and newspapers in their millions” (p. 21). The confusion and disappointment in mass communication research (Berelson, 1959; Klapper, 1960), born of the inability to find and measure convincing evidence of mass “hypodermic” effects, facilitated the use of the new “active audience” as a rallying cry.

But who was this “active” audience member and what would be evidence of activity? The active audience member began to take on characteristics of the classical liberal democratic citizen. In Bauer’s formulation emphasizing the “transaction,” there was an emphasis on choice. This choice was anchored in and ensured by an independent, even obstinate, citizen. Freedom of choice and the exercise of that choice was a sign of “audience activity” and, in another sphere, the health of the body politic.

But the new active audience left something to be desired. The active “individual” was a modern citizen-consumer patrolling the periphery of his or her consciousness with a vigilant consumerism. This was not the citizen of Rousseau or Jefferson. This was a shopkeeper’s citizen. Freedom and consumerism had been integrally joined in the American psyche. The famous Nixon-Kruschev “kitchen debate” had been carried out in the home of this new ideal citizen. The “freedom of choice” was a consumerist cornucopia of choices. What could be more appropriate in a mass culture typified by mass consumption than to glorify choice—the mere act of selecting a mass media product—as the hallmark of individualism and activism. Freedom was achieved by denying the effectiveness of mass communication and mass culture and by multiplying the number of choices. With the statistical explosion of probabilities and choices, how could mass culture take hold? The very consumption that the passive audience theorist so feared was turned on its head. Bauer’s triumphant shout announced that the passive audience was “liberated.”

In succeeding articles, declarations of the death of the passive audience were to become an academic ritual (for examples of a widespread phenomenon, see Berlo, 1977; McLeod & Becker, 1981; Palmgreen, 1984). For some, the pursuit of the active audience became an imperative. It became, in the words
of Bauer (1964b), "the model which ought to be inferred from the research" (p. 319). In research that followed, attempts have been made to turn the "ought" into an "empirical reality." But it will be argued that the agenda at the base of the commitment to what Blumler (1979) has called an "article of faith" has led to many oversights, theoretical difficulties, and tortuous reasoning as the concept has expanded into a system of research.

IN SEARCH OF THE OVERALL MEANING OF ACTIVITY

From the previous section we can see why the concept of audience activity is often defined through the negation of its antagonist, the passive audience. In the new expansive universe of the active audience, is it possible to be inactive or passive?

As the reader will recall, we find among the main tenets of the activity theory the concepts of utility, intentionality, and selectivity (Blumler, 1979), as well as involvement (Levy, 1979). But as we look closer at the concepts, a number of troubling questions emerge. Could it be that the mythic passive audience is being opposed by an empty shadow we call the "active audience"?

Looking at the basic concept of utility, a problem immediately reveals itself. Blumler's (1979) definition of utility, "mass communication has uses for people" (p. 13), defines use—any use whatsoever—as an indicator of activity. It restates what is seemingly obvious at the risk of being trivial. We must ask if it is likely for the uses and gratifications researcher ever to get the response from subjects that they "use" the mass media, because it has absolutely no use for them. Defined in this way, can this "activity" fail to dominate over its more passive antagonist of "un-use"?

Similar questions emerge when looking at intentionality. Intentionality is defined by Blumler as "media consumption . . . directed by prior motivation" (1979, p. 14). Again, should we be surprised that our audience members rarely respond that they read newspapers, listen to the radio, or watch television for "absolutely no reason at all." Self-report methodology by its very nature and structure invites the respondent to give meaning to his or her behavior. The very act of responding is an invitation to rationalize one's behavior, to create attitudinal "causes" for one's actions. If the existence of "passivity" is to be defined by self-reports of unmotivated behavior, should we be surprised by its absence?

The concepts of selectivity and involvement lead us to even more troubling questions. The process of selectivity, the sheer act of choice, is used as an indicator of activity. But it is almost impossible for the audience member to use the media without "choosing" to do so or, at least, selecting a medium. An audience member scanning a newspaper will inevitably be activated to choose some content. Indeed, it is a rare audience member who will turn to any medium and randomly select some content. Should we be surprised, given
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how the odds are stacked theoretically, when research results (Barwise, Ehrenberg, & Goathardt, 1982) "reveal" that the audience "does not seem so passive. Viewers do not just pick a program at random" (p. 27).

According to some measures of activity, haphazard flicking of the dial or surveying the offerings would turn the audience member into a member of the "active audience" (Levy & Windahl, 1984a, 1984b, 1985). In this case, we could have the paradoxical result that the highly selective audience member who watches only a specific program will appear "less active" than the less selective "channel hopper."

The concepts of activity and selectivity are supposed to be properties of individuals, but we are informed by Levy and Windahl (1985) that a major component of selectivity is a property of the medium:

The selection of media sources, and thus audience activity of this type, is constrained by the number of possible choices the audience member has at his or her disposal. . . . developments in communication technology that provide audience members with a greatly expanded repertoire of choices are resulting in increased levels of selectivity. (p. 26)

Levy and Windahl seem to be saying that by merely giving our "active audience" member more choices, we make him or her more active. But this claim says little about our audience member. The more we expand the statistical probabilities and scatter of choices, the more "seemingly" individualistic the choices become. Can conformism in mass culture be sabotaged by merely offering a "greater selection" of media products? To use an example from another realm, Do more brands of blue jeans equal less conformism?

And finally, we must ask one last disturbing question: If "involvement" is defined as some level of "cognitive or affective arousal" (Levy & Windahl, 1984a) or the use of schema to process media content, then what—short of brain death—would render an individual a member of the passive audience?

From these few questions about the basic components of the concept of activity, we can see that the pliable facets of the term seem to make the concept virtually unfalsifiable. It is, by definition, nearly impossible for the audience not to be active.

INTERNALIZED FREEDOM AND
THE INEVITABLE RETREAT
INTO COGNITIVE ACTIVITY

Each new communication technology (movies, television, computers, satellite broadcasting) and each potential psychological refinement by advertisers and propagandists ("subliminal techniques," physiological monitoring, etc.) activates public alarm over potential loss of cognitive independence. The history of mass communication effects research can be seen as
a response to perceived threats to the sanctity of the individual and this realm of inner freedom and self-determination. (For movies, see Payne Fund Studies, Lowery & DeFleur, 1983; for comics, see Wertham, 1954; for television, see Surgeon General, 1971, and Gerbner, 1980; for ideological stampeding, see Noelle-Neumann, 1974; for mass psychotic behavior, see Phillips, 1980.)

Since much of the underpinnings of our social system lie anchored in Enlightenment notions of reason (Cassirer, 1951), it is no wonder that potential threats to this philosophy, and the claims to self-determination that it upholds, have been met with desperate resistance. The irrational philosophies of humankind popular at the beginning of this century and the seeming susceptibility of the public to media-disseminated propaganda provoked alarm among media and social theorists (Lasswell, 1927; Lippman, 1965) while offering opportunities for others (Bernays, 1965). Ever since Luther's pamphlet, Freedom of a Christian (1952), both freedom and self-determination have been anchored by an inner freedom, control over the realm of one's thoughts (Marcuse, 1972). The rational, self-determined individual is the sine qua non of the philosophy of liberal democracy and possessive individualism (MacPherson, 1962).

If the concept of audience activity is to maintain its theoretical link to the concept of "imperviousness to influence," then the cognitive, as opposed to the behavioral area, represents the "final frontier." For Swanson (1979) "cognitive activity is ... an important, perhaps definitive, part of the study of 'what people do with media'" (p. 41). Though uses and gratifications theorists acknowledge the importance of psychological research from within their paradigm (Rouner, 1984), they also sadly acknowledge a "scarcity of empirical investigations of psychological origins" (Palmgreen, 1985) of needs, motivations, and cognitive processes.

When describing the audience activity as information processing, active audience theorists point out that individuals have varying levels of attention (Anderson & Lorch, 1983; Levy, 1983) and involvement (Levy, 1983; Levy & Windahl, 1984a, 1984b). Theorists characterize media use as intentional, goal-directed, and motivated behavior (Katz et al., 1974; McQuail, Blumler, & Brown, 1972; Rosengren, 1974). Individuals "construct meanings" in accordance with motivations and schema (Delia, 1974; Levy, 1983; Swanson, 1979). They are also active by becoming cognitively or affectively aroused (Levy, 1983; Levy & Windahl, 1984a, 1984b), which might be manifested as parasocial behavior (Levy, 1977, 1983).

A researcher describes the specific meaning of these terms by describing "active television viewing" as viewing that "goes beyond mere exposure and might involve critical or analytical processing of information ... " where viewers "may think about aspects of character and plot," which they "do ... immediately or later" (Rouner, 1984, p. 170-171). The same writer goes so far as to imply innate bases for "activity" such as "IQ" (p. 170). Such sketchy
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Given such descriptions, if activity is to be defined simply by the fact that audience members process information, use schema, and, in effect, “think” while using a medium, then obviously audience activity must be granted. This designation of activity renders the concept not only obvious, but unfalsifiable, while failing to distinguish any significant differences between the processing of media information and the cognitive processing of any other human experience. If simple processing equals activity, then the motto of the active audience theorist should be, “I think, therefore I am active.”

The debate over the cognitive activity of the active/passive audience does not rotate on the point of whether the audience “thinks” and processes information or on typologies of motivational theory (McGuire, 1974). Rather, the question turns on whether the audience has active control over the structure of the information process and whether the individual is best described not as passive but as reactive to the structure and content of the media. Anderson and Lorch (1983) demarcate the battleground clearly when they state that “the active theory puts control of viewing directly within the viewer (rather) than with the television set” (p. 9). This crucial and somewhat political point is echoed by uses and gratification theorists who argue that the audience member “bend(s) programs, articles, films, and songs to his own purposes” (Blumler, 1979, p. 202), leading McLeod and Becker (1981) to observe that “audience members in the real world exercise considerable freedom in their use of the mass media” (p. 71).

Anderson and Lorch (1983) peg the debate over the active or passive audience on the key issue of the processing of formal properties of the medium, specifically TV. Their question is whether the formal properties of the medium guide or “control” processing of content leading individuals to react to the medium, or whether the initiative lies with the active individual who uses “strategies” to manipulate media content.

Using an ingenious experimental manipulation involving altered versions of the Sesame Street program, Anderson and Lorch do show that attention among children is related to comprehension. They claim further to have isolated various formal features, namely “cues for attention,” that are used within active viewing strategies by children as markers of interesting content. Anderson and Lorch’s work clearly deflates the excessively passive caricatures of the audience peddled by popular writers (Mander, 1978; Winn, 1977). Mander, for example, writes that the viewer has “no cognition, no discernment, no notations upon the experience [s/he] is having” . . . “the viewer is little more than a vessel of reception.”

But what are we to make of these findings in the debate over the active, passive, or reactive audience? Anderson and Lorch (1983) in a rather polemical article feel they cannot eliminate the claims for automatic viewing processes as their own research shows a process of “attentional inertia” that maintains viewing (or nonviewing) “across breaks in comprehension and
changes in content” (p. 9). This finding at the very least shows that the cognitive processing is not as vigilant as one might suppose from the theoretical claims.

Furthermore, even Anderson and Lorch’s “attentional cues” are the result of a process of media training, or what might be called “media socialization.” These provide guides to cognitive processing that are taken up by the individual. It is important to note that the internalization of attentional cues comes after a thorough initiation into the terrain of television’s forms and conventions. Levy and Windahl (1984a), who purport to offer a “model of audience activity and gratifications” (p. 58), ignore this highly reactive process and acknowledge that their “model does not currently deal with processes of or socialization to media consumption nor with the creation of new patterns of media use” (p. 58). If a laboratory rat learns to press the right bars “actively” to receive some pleasant electronic stimulus, where does the locus of control stand, with the cognitive maneuverings of the laboratory rat or with the reinforcer?

The children’s minds that Anderson and Lorch describe are still minds in which the medium retains a great deal of initiative and, lest we forget, minds “strategically active” but also strategically inducted into a world in which all experience is prefabricated. We cannot assume that because there is evidence of processing, including strategic processing, that the viewer indeed “exercises considerable freedom.”

“ACTIVE” AND “PASSIVE”: A SPLIT BETWEEN CONSCIOUS AND PRECONSCIOUS PROCESSES?

To some degree, the split between the active and passive audience is reflected in the very processes of the mind. From the perspective of cognitive research, the battle between the active and the reactive/passive conceptions of the viewer can be recast in terms of the conscious versus the preconscious processing. In parallel terminology, it may be cast as the relative dominance of strategic, attentive processing versus early preattentive and automatic processing. The viewer-media nexus from this perspective also touches on the issue of intentional versus nonintentional absorption of information.

Much active audience theory is moved by the undercurrents of seventeenth-century Cartesian rationalism and individualism that is so much a part of our intellectual culture. There is a tendency to identify cognition with that section of the information processing that is consciousness and open to introspection. This same tendency is found in phenomenologically oriented critical theorists who, in the words of Husserl, owe a great deal to the “Cartesian overthrow,” which placed the conscious mind and one’s self-constitution of that conscious mind at the center of the lifeworld and of science (Husserl, 1973). This
preservation of the sanctity of the conscious mind is crucial to a defense of stronger versions of the active audience concepts.

The very definition of the active audience as it is found in the communication literature implies a vigilant, self-directed, rationalistic consciousness aware of its needs and motivations, bending media materials in pursuit of these motivations and in the maintenance of cognitive independence. Hawkins and Pingree (1985), following a suggestion by Salomon (1979), point to "cognitive effort" and "mindful and deep processing" as a purely conscious or "nonautomatic mental elaboration." If a significant part of the processing occurs outside the conscious mind or preconsciously, if the preconscious cognitive processing is strongly affected by media forms and structures, and if memory reflects as much the preconscious and unconscious processes as the conscious ones, then the active audience member would be ruler over a highly reduced territory.

This conclusion points to the interesting realm of preconscious processing. Here we find that the medium, its semiotic/syntactic forms, and other environmental variables interact with early preattentive, preconscious, and automatic cognitive processes. Lachman, Lachman, and Butterfield (1979), in an excellent review of the information processing literature, point out the following:

"It is the exception and not the rule when thinking is conscious; but by its very nature, conscious thought seems the only sort. It is not the only sort; it is the minority. . . . There are many forms of life whose information processing is accomplished entirely without benefit of consciousness. Unconscious processing is phylogenetically prior and constitutes the product of millions of years of evolution. Conscious processing is in its evolutionary infancy. (p. 298)"

One such unconscious process that has been studied in relation to television viewing is the orienting reflex (Kimmel, Van Olst, & Orlebeke, 1979). Reeves et al. (1984, 1986) used a continuous electroencephalogram measure (EEG) of alpha waves to study the involuntary orienting response to movement and edits in television commercials. Subjects were instructed simply to watch regular television programming including commercials in as naturalistic a setting as possible. Alpha waves have been shown to be negatively correlated with mental effort and attention. Reeves et al. found that these purely formal characteristics of the medium forced the viewers to cognitively react to communicator controllable, formal features. It was further found that data-drive decreases in alpha waves were positively correlated with learning as measured by immediate and delayed recall measures. Reeves et al. provide evidence of significant cognitive processes that seem clearly to influence and possibly even to bypass the processing strategies of the viewer. Furthermore, these stimulus-driven orientation responses lead to the successful transfer of information into memory.
The EEG measures call into question Anderson and Lorch's (1983) contention that such movements are merely cues for comprehensibility since the orienting reflex can be triggered by sudden incomprehensible and primitive stimuli such as random light or sound bursts. The response is clearly stimulus driven, reactive, largely involuntary, and manipulatable by the communicator. These findings clearly support a theory of reactive processing of television in which the final semantic residue of a specific media experience involves a kind of cortical dialogue between the formal features and content of the medium and the "frames" (Minsky, 1975) or schemata (Rumelhart, 1978) of the audience member. Stimulus-driven, nonintentional processes clearly influence memory. While the resulting memory trace is not absolutely determined as to content, the processing guidance provided by the formal features of the medium significantly outline the majority of audience decodings.

Let us look a little more closely at the concept of passive and active processes in cognition. The perceptual and cognitive experience of our proverbial television viewer is the product of wonderfully complex and subtle preconscious processes that translate the noise and light of TV into a phrase of meaning in the endless chatter of social communication. This patterning, construction, and identification of meaning is not so much "passive" as sensitive and "reactive" (as demonstrated by Reeves et al., 1984) to the shifts in the stimuli of the environment including the media environment.

How is one to maintain the standard view of the active member with its echoes of the nineteenth-century image of a rationalistic and self-willed individual? To maintain such a view of the active audience member would require a defense of the sanctity of the conscious realm and would require one to lay claim to strong control over the realms of meaning of the television message and memory for the message. But, as we will see, this position may be a difficult one to hold, given what is increasingly known about the structures of human cognition.

While conscious thought may be active in that it directs attention and prepares the organism for action (Turvey, 1977), one of the functions of consciousness and attention may be to inhibit the less focused semantic associations of the preconscious processing (Marcel, 1983b, p. 283; Posner & Snyder, 1975). A number of studies suggest that the preconscious processing of meaning may be carried out automatically to a high level whether this analysis is followed or not followed by conscious selection and identification (Allport et al., 1985; Carr, McCauley, Sperber, & Parmlee, 1982; Marcel, 1983a, 1983b; McCauley, Parmlee, Sperber, & Carr, 1980; Philpott & Wilding, 1979). Methodologically most of these studies try to demonstrate semantic priming effects for unreported and undetectable stimuli such as words or overlapping drawings in which one drawing is not identified. For example, in a typical experiment studying the stages of processing and the structure of semantic memory, a word such as tree or wrist is presented below
detection to assess the degree to which it facilitates the processing and influences the specific meaning of a polysemous related word such as *palm* (Marcel, 1983a).

Evidence is found for what seems to be spreading semantic activation of networks of meaning of a word in the process of identification and selection of a particular meaning. Meaning may not be the exclusive domain or even predominant domain of the conscious mind. The content of consciousness is the product of these earlier preconscious processes. As we will see below, these more reactive processes can influence meaning, behavior, and memory. Because these studies suggest that much high-level processing may occur offstage, this finding has potentially disturbing, philosophical consequences for our notion of the self-possessed, rationalistic citizen-subject.

There has been continued controversy over the structure and effects of preconscious processing (Dixon, 1971, 1981) with challenges on theoretical or methodological grounds (Cheesman & Merikle, 1984; Hollender, 1985; Johnston & Dark, 1986). Nonetheless, the question for many is not so much whether there is some semantic analysis at the preconscious level but how much of semantic analysis is carried out at that level.

In a study designed to develop new techniques for studying film and television structure (Biocca, Neuwirth, Oshagan, Pan, & Richards, 1987; Reeves et al., 1986) researchers found evidence for the same kind of preconscious priming effects. Based on this finding and the psychological evidence, we can claim that the meaning of a television message, while constructed within the individual viewer and therefore by the viewer, may be largely constructed outside of consciousness. Conscious experience and thought appears to be one of the later stages in a hierarchy of cognitive processes that monitor the overflowing perceptual environment (Marcel, 1983b; Marr, 1981). Ancillary preconscious processes regulate the flow of information, assemble it, and connect it to the prodigious information stored in interconnected networks of meaning in long-term memory. These preconscious processes shape the television stimulus before conscious and attentional processes and may mitigate goal-motivated processes. Meaning in television may be the final product of a complex interaction of message form and content, contextual and situational factors, as well as the semiotic competence of the viewer, sociopsychological construction of the viewers' semantic associations, and, finally, idiosyncratic processing dispositions (Biocca et al., 1987).

There is also the startling evidence from work on split brain patients (Gazzaniga, 1985) in which stimuli in the form of two stories are each presented separately to one of the two hemispheres. The stories were visually flashed to the separate hemi-retina of each eye. The hemi-retinas (left and right) of each eye are connected to the contralateral hemisphere (left hemi-retinas to the right hemisphere and vice versa). The split brain patients had to recall the story with a verbal report. Verbal activity is predominantly
controlled by the left hemisphere. When the story was recalled, it contained the left hemisphere's "version" of the story as well as information "seeping in" from the remaining connections to right hemisphere. This "seeping" was evidenced by suppositions and inferences built into the recalled story. The recalled version furnished by the verbally dominant left hemisphere provided coherent but incorrect rationalizations for its linguistic behavior, which included information whose origins in the speaking left hemisphere could not identify. To one of the key figures in this research area, neuropsychologist Gazzaniga, the findings suggest a modular mind in which consciousness is an inference-making (rationalistic), action-oriented processor that does not have direct access to information from other modules that govern behavior.

The processing of mass media such as television by members of the "audience" may involve a set of bottom-up processes absorbing information from the environment, categorizing, and structuring with high capacity, perceptual, and cognitive routines. These early processes, which are not open to introspection by the conscious mind, nonetheless create meaning and influence the disposition of the subject while leaving behind long-term memory traces.

On the other hand, there is also evidence of active processes associated with consciousness, that definitely influence the structure of preconscious cognitive routines (Marcel, 1983a, 1983b) by influencing the selection of semantic "models" the viewer will use while processing and interpreting the television stimulus. These processing "agendas" (I hesitate to call them schemata because of problems with the schema concept) may be based on moment-to-moment changes, differing goals, and long-term dispositional states. They may indeed inhibit certain semantic associations and be the source of "oppositional readings" of the television message. These oppositional readings are not guaranteed. As the persuasion literature reveals, the communicator may take a "peripheral," indirect message strategy specifically intended to minimize "conscious elaboration" of the message and the generation of oppositional counterarguments (Cacioppo & Petty, 1986; Moore & Hutchinson, 1986; Petty & Cacioppo, 1981).

Information processing, though it may be relatively unengaged, can display astounding persistence. Shepard's (1967) now classic series of experiments on the tremendous capacity of the mind for pictorial recognition memory, even in states of low motivation and "activity," is an excellent example of such processes. When we consider the fact that these processes are actively exploited by communicators such as advertisers (Krugman, 1977), the claim of cognitive "independence," based on schematic processing alone, appears exaggerated. Regardless of the well-established theory that information is schema driven and these schemata provide "anticipatory frameworks" for decoding, Neisser (1976), who is invariably cited whenever the word schema is used, acknowledges the significance of the stimulus-(data-) driven aspect of the information-acquisition process. Learning would be impossible without it.
SOCIAL ORIGINS OF
ACTIVITY AND THE "LOCUS OF CONTROL"

As we peer inside the mind of the audience member, it may be that we will find the two hemispheres of activity and passivity along with more complicated sets of processes. Our ideal active audience member, as defined by the active audience theorist, seems upon reflection to be burdened by the baggage of our seventeenth-century ideal of the rational, self-willed, and self-determined individual.

To Jean Paul Sartre (1960/1976) the question of the activity or passivity of the individual in face of the media seemed reasonably clear:

When I listen to a broadcast, the relation between the broadcaster and myself is not a human one: in effect, I am passive in relation to what is being said, to the political commentary on the news, etc. This passivity, is an activity which develops on every level and over many years, can to some extent be resisted: I can write, protest, approve, congratulate, threaten, etc. But it must be noted that these activities will carry weight only if a majority (or a considerable minority) of listeners who do not know me do likewise. (p. 271)

Sartre's simple discussion brings up the political question of control to which we will also add the scientific question of cause. Both are different faces of the same issue.

The question of the source of activity or the "locus of control" lies at the heart of the active versus passive audience debate. Locus of control can be defined as the place or agent wherein resides the major determining or causal force of the content and orientation of the audience member's cognitions and behavior. Does this locus of control lie in the social origins of motivations, in some psychological force, in the formal structure of the medium itself, in the myriad content and the persuasive ("great") communicator, or does it reside in the individual? If the concept of "activity" is to have the political teeth alluded to by Sartre or even if the concept is to have psychological strength, this question must be answered. This is the question addressed in this section.

For the early mass society theorist, the locus of control lay with the manipulators of the mass media, while for the more demographic and class-oriented traditions (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1948), the locus of control lay in common and predictable experiences and socialization influences that cut along class or demographic lines. In other tradition (McLuhan, 1962, 1964), the locus of control lay with the medium itself, its formal features, and its powerful organization of experience. There are certainly other stances than these and countless combinations and permutations. The truth may indeed lie in a well-integrated combination of these.

The active audience construct has gravitated to assertions that posit most of the locus of control within the individual. When this position has been
forcefully asserted, it has often been cast as exaggeration wherein the individual is militantly self-determined. Dervin (1980), using tenuous metaphorical references to physical theories of relativity, sketches a theory of phenomenological subjectivism that sometimes teeters on the abyss of solipsism. McLeod and Becker (1974) have observed, “Perhaps the approach does depict the audience as too powerful if it can be inferred that almost any need can induce any media behavior, which, in turn, provides any gratification” (p. 80).

It is rarely an all-or-nothing proposition. More often the active audience theorist retains the locus of control within the individual but acknowledges the influence of social and psychological forces. Palmgreen (1984) states that the “meaning of the media-related needs and requirements of individuals springs from their location in and interaction with the social environment” (p. 25). In Levy and Windahl's (1984a) attempt at a balance, they argue that while individuals are “conditioned by social and psychological structures” and constrained “by available communications, individuals choose what communication settings they will enter.” But this decision is “motivated by goals and uses that are self-defined” (pp. 51-52). What we have is often an attempt to maintain the sanctity of the individual including rhetorical statements regarding individual freedom as much of the causal force shifts to vaguely specified antecedent social and psychological forces.

McGuire (1974) admits “that external circumstances play a large part in determining one’s media exposure,” but nonetheless asserts that this “does not rule out the possibility that personal needs are also a factor” (p. 168). Though work is accumulating in the area, Palmgreen (1984) acknowledges there is a “scarcity” of empirical investigations of the psychological origins of media uses gratifications while adding in a thorough review that “in most of these investigations the social origins of gratifications are not the primary focus of study” (p. 26). While mentioning the importance of these factors, which obviously influence the locus of control and the direction of preponderant influence, uses and gratification and active audience theorists state that they have paid “less attention” to social and psychological origins and that “social and environmental circumstances that lead people to turn to the mass media are... little understood” (Katz et al., 1974, p. 24, 26). These theorists add that there is “no general theoretical framework which systematically links gratification to their social origins” (Levy, 1978; Palmgreen, 1984, p. 28).

What, then, of the claims of “imperviousness to influence” of the audience and the stronger definitions of activity that so animated the early stirrings of the active audience in Bauer’s writings? How much real, fully exercised control lies in the hands of the audience member? In the classic terminology of Sartrean existential philosophy, are the audience members oriented for themselves or for the other? To put it another way, is the individual “active” for himself or herself or “active” as an agent of social structures and forces? If the individual’s relation to the media and media content is largely determined by social or sociopsychological imperatives, some of which may be media generated, then are the claims of “freedom of choice,” “self-definition,” and
"cognitive independence" rhetorical exaggerations? Has a commitment to a free and independent individual cast too optimistic a light on the socially buffeted audience member? These questions are important because they address the larger question of freedom and determinism of which the communication theory's active-passive audience debate is an instantiation.

If the audience member is not as much in control of the process, as implied by active audience theorists, what we may have, then, is a largely amorphous vessel within which swirls the influence of larger forces. The individual becomes the vortex in a whirling pattern of physiological, psychological, social, and semiotic structures.

At this point, the somewhat humanistic question of the locus of control turns to the rather scientific question of causality. If we are to have an adequate explanation and understanding of the meeting of audience member and the medium, we have to obtain a sense of the true causes of media behavior and of the intellectual or cognitive framework of the viewer. Blumler (1979) informs his reader that these individual "orientations" . . . co-vary with numerous other communication relevant factors such as (a) people's circumstances and roles, (b) their personality dispositions and capacities, (c) their actual patterns of mass media consumption, and (d) ultimately, the process of effects itself" (p. 202). Note that his (a) and (b) factors can be listed as causes of these "orientations" and that (c) and to a lesser degree (d) are effects of these orientations.

The more deeply active audience theorists look inside these "active individuals" who "bend the media" to their uses, the more these theorists find that their active audience members are transparent. Motivations or "orientations" are mentioned, but these notions tend to fade in reference to social and psychological origins of these "causes." In the very act of trying to rescue the individual from the rhetoric of mass society, the active audience theorist inevitably delivers him or her once again to the tossings of social forces. The admitted antagonism (Blumler, 1979) of the active audience theorist to mass audience terminology leads him or her to avoid dissolving the causal force of the individual agent into antecedent social and sociopsychological variables. The individual consciousness and body are definitely the locus of action but not necessarily the locus of control.

TOWARD A MORE MODEST APPRAISAL OF ACTIVITY

Does all the discussion over the activity of the audience merely boil down to a general statement that the individual or individual intentionality is a mediating variable? Or is it a phenomenological exploration of the meaning of media, media use, and media content to the individual—a Copernican shift that places the audience member's motivations at the center of a research universe?
But how far can we go with this concept beyond phenomenologically tinged descriptions of the experience of the media as "lived"? For Carey and Kreiling (1974) and Swanson (1979), this concept is valid enough, liberating individual action from the functionalist or system-oriented strings sought by puppeteer social scientists. In this "action/motivational" perspective (McQuail & Gurevitch, 1974), external explanatory frames are cast off and the audience member himself or herself validates the language of experience. This subjective experience of the media and one's action with the media are indeed a highly desirable source of study. But its aggregation as data in the spirit of functionalist hubris does not necessarily define an "objective" reality. With all the statistical manipulations of these self-reports, the active audience researcher cannot really declare that such constitute the whole of the interaction between media and audience. As Carey and Kreiling (1974) so aptly point out:

In any universe of discourse persons construct legitimations that make their own normative patterns of behavior appear right and reasonable, and social scientists often conspire with such communities to heighten the plausibility of their activities. (p. 230)

If, as the individual constructs his or her reality and the content of semantic memory, a team of social structures, media structures, and physiological structures stand "actively" beside, handing to the individual the bricks and mortar of that self-construction, then what are we to make of this product? If the fully anchored causes of the "activity" of the audience are ignored or cannot be adequately specified other than individually self-reported causes or motivations, then what kind of science can we build other than a phenomenological inventory of meanings, rationalizations, and, sometimes, false consciousness?

One fall-back position is to argue for some variant of the transactional model (McLeod & Becker, 1974, 1979; Schramm, 1983) heralded by Bauer (1964a). In Bauer's formulation that model was couched in the language of the marketplace with references to "hard bargains," "contracts," and one's "money's worth." The analogy conveniently implied an equitable exchange between equals, "at least most of the time." The analogy was an attractive one because it made the media-audience transaction fit so neatly into the logic of American socioeconomics. It hailed the "sovereign consumer" in the communications marketplace. But, as Schramm (1983) notes, the transaction is just as often "inequitable." Just as Galbraith (1968) and others have largely exploded the business myth of the independent "sovereign consumer," the "hard-bargaining" active audience member may be more myth than substance. The audience member has power, rarely as an isolated "active individual," but, as Sartre observed above, more often as part of an active group (see also Habermas, 1983). The individual, indeed, acts and chooses, but within an ideological structure whose raison d'etre is economic accumulation or
For some theorists, the active audience concept may almost be a mystical entity with some of the causal power once ascribed to similar ideological fulcrums such as the “soul,” “reason,” “the will,” “the ego.” These are all centers of activity and self-direction. The active-passive debate could be freed of the need to establish the center of the communication universe: the individual, the medium, or the culture. Unfortunately, the communication universe already bedeviled with complexity becomes more so when such relativity abandons a search for a solid center.

In this decentered universe, a number of competing and interacting points of “activity” would probably need to be incorporated. The fact that mass communication theory frequently returns to some form of the active-passive audience dichotomy reflects an attempt by mass communication theorists to come to grips with fundamental interactions among the audience, the media, and communicators. At present, active audience theory may obscure important relationships by overemphasizing the role of the audience and failing to incorporate key factors fully.

The following are suggested as possible ways of reformulating certain aspects of theorizing on the active audience:

(1) Abandon the metaconstruct of the “active audience.” It is clear from our discussion that the metaconstruct of audience activity attempts to cover too many phenomena with the fuzzy entity called “activity.” Theorists who work with the concept admit that it is “undeniably complex and multidimensional” (Palmgreen et al., 1985) and that there is “no reason” to anticipate an “exhaustive” and possibly adequate definition. Rather, the concept floats on a bed of cultural connotations that cannot be fully defined, let alone really measured.

There seem to be two versions of the active audience concept, a strong one and a weak one. The strong one emphasizes the autonomy of the audience, its self-determination, and, at the very least, an obstinacy bordering on “imperviousness to influence.” This emphasis is part of the origin of the concept and the form often implied in social and psychological theories. The weak form merely points to motivational and behavioral phenomena such as selectivity and utility. This emphasis is the “activity” that is most often measured and offered as “proof” of a global concept of activity.

The conclusion that the metaconstruct should be abandoned is emerging within the uses and gratifications tradition itself. In an interesting and bold article, Blumler et al. (1985) call for a “rejection of audience imperialism. . . the audience member is not an unconstructed master of his or her cultural faith” (p. 259). At the very least this suggests abandoning the strong version of audience activity.

This retreat leaves us with the weak version. Because the weak version attempts to bask in the grand connotations of independence emanating from the strong version, it is suggested that it be abandoned also. In its place, the various subcomponents of “activity,” selectivity, utility, involvement, and so
on should be treated as separate concepts. The sometimes humble claims that each concept can make should not be merged to imply the more sweeping claims of the strong version of activity.

(2) Theoretically define and measure the communicator's objectives, strategies, and perceptions of the audience. Part of the dichotomization of the active and passive audience grows out of a shifting sense of who best achieves their objectives in the mass communication encounter, the audience or the communicator. This concern deals with the issue of the primary "locus of control" over the flow and use of information in the process of communication. This question is considered at the level of interpersonal communication. It should be incorporated into the study of audience activity, if we are to pretend to make any definitive statements on the level of audience independence, the equity or lack of equity in the "transaction," and the existence or nonexistence of "imperviousness to influence." This investigation may require not looking at generalized media use, but at specific messages in specific contexts as has been suggested by McLeod and Becker (1981).

If audience decisions are based on prior motivations, how does the communicator use audience motivations and goals to assure the success of his or her message and the audience research is clearly built on this strategy (Bettman, 1986; Cacioppo & Petty, 1986; Greenwald & Leavitt, 1986; Moore & Hutchinson, 1986). Game theory could be used in this kind of analysis. What happens when the goals of the communicator and the audience member match or conflict in a variety of ways? What situations lead to goal conflict? How and what kind of oppositional readings are possible when they are in conflict, and how are oppositional readings limited?

(3) Incorporate a theory of the text into the analysis of activity. In the hands of some theorists, concepts of utility and selectivity tend to reify media and information by overly stressing their instrumentality. It is easy to see media and information as objects or tools pulled to satisfy some need or social purpose outside the context of the medium-viewer interaction. But when the viewer uses the form of a medium as a gratification (Smith, 1986), the viewing is labeled "ritualistic" and therefore passive (Rubin, 1984, 1985). It becomes difficult when perceiving the audience in this way to see the process of the creation and unfolding of meaning that occurs when an audience member utilizes or thinks within a medium and a set of codes. Explanations will always tend to point outside the ongoing process of media-audience interaction.

Recently, some active audience theorists have rediscovered the text and the power of the message itself (Blumler et al., 1985). Analysis of the structure of the text allows the researcher to ask, To what degree is the message and the codes it uses open or closed (Eco, 1979, 1984)? Thus this is a potentially rich area. An unflaggingly rigorous semiotic theory combined with the theories and methods of cognitive psychology could allow researchers to tap a dimension where media, cognition, and sociocultural variables meet simultaneously in the semantic and syntactic structure of the message and its codes. Recently, some researchers have attempted to develop a technique for
studying the process of moment-to-moment interaction of the audience member with film or television program (Biocca et al., 1987). It is hoped that these researchers can use such a technique to tease out the influence of the structural properties of media on the developing semantic path of meaning from other influences such as audience motivation, procedural and semantic knowledge, context, as well as more traditional demographic variables.

Is audience “obstinacy” a purposeful, oppositional bending of the message and its codes or simply a lack of familiarity with the code? To what degree is the success or failure of a message based on its content (attitudinal disposition or behavioral request) or the form (use of codes, specific encoding, perceived source)? To what degree do the codes encircle the audience and the communicator and define the parameters of active and passive decoding?

(4) Include the psychological role of the medium and, specifically, its formal structures in moment-to-moment information processing. To what degree is audience activity or passivity (behavioral or cognitive) influenced by media socialization and habituation to the formal features of the medium itself? It is clear that the notion of activity will be dependent on the development of research on the relative influence of strategically driven processing as well as automatic processing on information gain and the organization of that information in memory. The work of Salomon (1979) offers a good model for tracing how the medium itself—its specific formal features and the structure of its symbol systems—influence the processing of information. We cannot talk about activity of the audience without understanding the “active” role of the medium itself. What kind of information does the medium favor and make more salient? For example, it is clear that different kinds of information are favored by linguistic and pictorial media (Paivio, 1971).

(5) Define the role of media socialization and habituation. Related to the role of the medium is the need to understand and to incorporate in any discussion of the audience the process of media socialization. Specifically, we could better understand the indoctrination of the audience into the structural and symbolic forms of the media, and the creation of development of patterns of media consumption. Media socialization can be studied at a variety of levels:

(1) Media socialization at the level of ontogenetic and epigenetic development concerns the work on the development of children’s perception and use of the media (Wartella, 1979a, 1979b) and can provide some insight into the cognitive skills that are required, favored, and developed by a particular medium.

(2) Media socialization of specific audiences such as cohort groups, “interpretive communities,” “taste cultures,” and other social strata investigates the impact, indoctrination, habituation, and relative influence of a medium and its contents over time. Smaller social currents caused by the differential introduction of new media, differential use, and differential susceptibility to effects can be teased out (see Wober, 1983, for an attempt to
capture this kind of information). This level of analysis is well developed in uses and gratification theory as well as in industry audience research. Motivational and demographic characteristics of media use have been addressed by a number of researchers. What is being suggested is not an analysis of the audience characteristics at this level, or the uses and gratifications of new technologies (Williams et al., 1985), but an analysis of the medium as an "active" agent.

The goal is to create a context to assess where the initiative lies in the process of media selection (Zillmann & Bryant, 1985) and moment-to-moment information processing. Specifically, how much of the initiative lies with the medium due to past socialization, or medium specific access to hard wired (genetic) automatic responses (i.e., the orienting response) or soft wired (learned) responses to media specific characteristics (i.e., pace of film cuts). This interaction is a critical and interesting one. It has been pursued in experiments and can be analyzed with surveys as Wober (1983) has tried, as well as searching historically for evidence of perceptual shifts (Biocca, 1986, in press-a, in press-b).

(3) Media socialization at the cultural level, in some ways, was the grand question the media-centered (McQuail, 1985) theories suggested, though not fully answered, by writers like Innis (1950) and McLuhan (1962, 1964). Understanding the "use" of media for cultures (large audiences?) from this vantage point can be regained by studying the media socialization within cultures and significant subcultures over longer time spans (Eisenstein, 1979) or cross-culturally. The influence of the form is of course by no means fixed or independent but is to some degree channeled by existing cultural traditions, the influence of other "media traditions," and by the sociopolitical and professional organization of media institutions.

These few suggestions arise primarily from cognitive and semiotic perspectives because active audience theory, especially within the "uses and gratifications" theory, already addresses many of the traditional sociological questions. Factoring in all these variables is certainly not easy, but it is necessary if we are to answer the larger question posed by the active-passive audience debate. But with all factors combined, it is questionable whether we can really speak clearly of "activity" as a property just of individuals or audiences, or even primarily of individuals or audiences. With so many antecedent causes and interactions, "activity" seems like an inappropriate label for a host of phenomena.

In this more relative universe that is proposed, individuals do not so much act as react and interact within humanly created constellations of social and cognitive structures. The question of initiative at any point in time artificially isolates a moment in the communication process. Given the philosophical foundations of Western society, it is understandably difficult to cede any ground regarding the sanctity and power of the individual, the temple of rationalism. Our vision is often clouded by our desire to see self-determined and self-reliant individuals.
Without subscribing to the possibility of an ideology-free science, we can observe that it has often been easier to change one's scientific model to match one's desired social model, than to ask society to change to fit that same desired social model. The origin of the active audience construct was an overreaction. It was overreaction bred of disillusionment. Mass communicators had to explain the lack of clear mass media effects and, in some cases, their lack of success as manipulators. But this disillusionment was simply an intractable reality interfering with social engineering fantasies of the social sciences.

The goal of the active audience theorists is to free people from the undue influence of the media by showing how they already are free. A side effect was to suggest freeing the social sciences of the "duty" to protect us from ourselves. But though it was originally devised to show how the individual was free from communicator manipulation, the active audience concept may have come full circle. According to Levy and Windahl (1984a), who used activity as a variable rather than a simple declaration, the "active audience" may be "more affected" by the media. The thesis is dialectically transformed into its antithesis. Bauer's (1964a) "imperviousness to influence" evaporates.

We can see that the concept of active audience defined as cognitive independence, personal freedom, and imperviousness to influence appears strangely to be both bloated and seemingly anemic and thin. By attempting to cover everything the audience member does, it ends up specifying little and excluding nothing. Every twitch, every thought, every choice—both mindful and mindless—is recorded as evidence of "activity." In some extreme formulations of the active-passive audience dichotomy, only a corpse propped in front of a television set could be registered as a member of the much scorned "passive audience." But our audience is made of real human beings throbbing with life in a society that—thankfully—has not yet reached a point of psychic and social closure, a state of total determinism. Should we be surprised when, as social scientists, we behold perception, choice, reflection, and even selection? And if in the shopping isles of media fare our active citizen chooses his or her banalities in pink, blue, or red boxes, should we pronounce them free, active, and "impervious to influence"?

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