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Author's Book Introduction

Critical Audience: A Social Psychology of Media Criticism

LEE Jinah (Ed.)

Shinyosha, 2023, 240 Pages[1]

LEE Jinah*

Introduction

This paper provides an overview of theoretical perspectives and literature pertaining to the critical audience and media criticism based on the Japanese book *Critical Audience: A Social Psychology of Media Criticism*. The paper delves into the intricate dynamics of media influence and emphasizes the importance of understanding and acknowledging the audience in unraveling these complexities.

The audience, as elucidated by Abercrombie & Longhurst (1998), serves as both the object of study and the subject of discourse. It is conceptualized as an entity that is assembled, imagined, and constructed from a research perspective, as highlighted by Turnbull (2020). The advent of the digital era and the rise of social media have brought about profound changes in the way audiences engage with media content. This transformation has not only reshaped the media-audience relationship but has also paved the way for increased citizen participation in engaging with mainstream media and publicly responding to its content, as noted by Kaun (2014) and Mansell (2012).

Despite these transformative changes, there remains a critical gap– the need for empirical research that systematically explores different facets of audience criticism of various media contents. This necessity encompasses a broad spectrum, from news and entertainment to advertising. The overarching goal of this book is to fill the gap, providing valuable insights into the dynamics of audience-media interactions in contemporary society.

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[1] This paper is a summarized English version of the editor's introductory chapter from the book.

Audience: From Passivity to Critical Engagement in Media Studies

The term audience traces its etymological lineage to the Latin term *audire*, which means 'listening' or 'hearing' (Turnbull, 2020). Originally characterizing people assembled in a specific physical location, the concept of the audience has transformed due to advancements in media (McQuail, 2005=2010). Over time, it has transitioned from individuals physically congregating to witness performances to individuals who observe others appreciating the same content without direct interaction, collectively experiencing it as imagined entities (Turnbull, 2020).

Likewise, Sullivan (2019), drawing upon Webster's (1998) model, expounds on three categories of audiences: 1) "the audience-as-outcome," influenced and acted upon by the media; 2) "the audience-as-mass," dispersed temporally and spatially, autonomously behaving as a large assembly unaware of each other; and 3) "the audience-as-agent," freely selecting media that aligns with their needs, actively interpreting from their own experiences (pp.7-9).

The conceptualization of the audience arises from the interplay between individuals and the media embedded within the societal framework. With the progression and diversification of media, associated institutions, industries, societal values, and globalization, the interpretations and significances enveloping media experiences and practices for the audience have become increasingly heterogeneous.

Jensen and Rosengren (1990) examined audience research through five theoretical frameworks: effects research, uses and gratifications research, literary criticism, cultural studies, and reception analysis. They emphasized that media effects research focused on the negative consequences of media use. With the advent of new media, research has often revolved around potential negative effects.

In the early phases of mass communication studies, there was a strong emphasis on the harmful effects of media on children and adolescents (McQuail, 2005=2010). Cultivation theory (Gerbner & Gross, 1976), a paradigm of such studies, posits that prolonged exposure to undesirable content on television, such as violent programming, can shape an individual's perception of reality to conform to the portrayals on television.

As audience studies have evolved, there has been a significant shift from media-centered theories to audience-centered theories. According to Oishi (2010), an active audience is an entity that can actively and diversely interpret media texts within their social and cultural contexts. This research perspective has led to the "rediscovery" of the audience (Oishi, 2010, p.82). In the context of the United States, this shift has sparked a growing interest in audience-centered theories. These theories are exemplified by uses and gratifications studies, which suggest that audiences use media to meet specific needs and derive satisfaction from that use (Jensen & Rosengren, 1990).

Concurrently, cultural studies scholars in the United Kingdom, notably

represented by Stuart Hall, advocated emphasizing the societal and political context in which media content is produced. They highlighted the process of "encoding" the content and the subsequent "decoding" by the audience (Baran & Davis, 2003=2007). In this milieu, the audience activism in cultural studies was not about the individual "free" interpretations pursued in uses and gratifications research but activism "constrained by societal contexts" (Takahashi, 2016, p.311).

Furthermore, considering the evolution of audience studies amid media changes, Ross and Nightingale (2003=2007) observe that audiences have shifted from passive observers to engaged critics. This transformation represents a fundamental shift in how individuals interact with media content. Building on the foundations of active audience theory, the concept of the critical audience has emerged as a pivotal perspective in understanding how individuals engage with and interpret media content.

Media Criticism Through Exit and Voice: Perspectives on Text, Production and Audience

The shift toward audience-centered theories established the theoretical basis for media literacy (Baran & Davis, 2003=2007). According to scholars like Vande Berg, Wenner, and Gronbeck (2004), media criticism goes beyond mere media literacy and serves as a vital tool for citizen empowerment and engagement. According to their argument, media literacy is enhanced when it is combined with media criticism. Citizen engagement with the public sphere, which is facilitated by mass media, contributes to a higher level of media literacy through reasoning and critical acumen. Criticism involves "organizing, systematically and thoroughly describing, analyzing, interpreting, and evaluating patterned relationships to share an informed perspective with others" (Vande Berg et al., 2004, p.222).

Furthermore, Vande Berg et al. (2004) emphasize the importance of acquiring, practicing, and disseminating television criticism. They categorize it into three main types: 1) "Text-centered television criticism," which provides insightful and analytical elucidations through critical analysis focusing on the textual aspects of television programs, 2) "Producer-centered television criticism," which delves into the production background and processes of television program texts, and 3) "Audience-centered television criticism," which focuses on the role of the audience and the dynamic process of reception. The categorization highlights the multifaceted nature of media criticism research. The argument suggests that citizens with literacy and critical thinking skills can engage ethically with television and thereby contribute substantially to the democratization of public discourse.

Drawing on Maras's assertion that criticism creates a "space of possibility" through various forms of discourse, rhetoric, concepts, and political endeavors (Maras, 2007, p.169), Kaun (2014) argues that media criticism is shaped and

maintained within this "space of possibility." Kaun (2014) further explores the dynamics of audience engagement through the lenses of "exit" and "voice," as articulated by Hirschman (1970=2005). These concepts illuminate the dual nature of media criticism, which involves both active engagement and the choice to disengage. Kaun (2014) examines critical interpretation and practice directed at the text, the production, and the audience based on research conducted with young people in Estonia.

Criticism of text includes evaluation of information quality, narrative structures, themes, statements, and scope of discussion. Additionally, criticism of media production considers the economic and political frameworks that shape media logic. Moreover, some interview participants expressed concern about their peers' lack of interest in political news and their focus on soft news or entertainment content. This highlights a significant issue regarding the quality and influence of news media.

Furthermore, participants tended to actively disengage from mainstream news and seek information from alternative sources. Conversely, those who aimed to engage critically with the media showed a keen interest in the quality and influences of news media. Participants sought to express their views with the expectation that alternative media spaces, such as blogs and comment sections, could compete with mainstream media.

The diverse reactions of the participants, which ranged from disengaging with mainstream news to actively engaging with alternative media platforms, reveal the intricate nature of media criticism.

Consequences of Media Criticism

Critical Engagement with Media

As audiences become more critical, their interactions with media content become complex, influencing their trust in media and their broader perceptions of societal issues. According to Kaun (2014), societal and audience-centric methodologies in media criticism are based on the idea of the virtuous citizen, assuming that audiences fulfill their civic responsibilities through media criticism. As previously mentioned, research on media criticism goes beyond examining negative perceptions to encourage active engagement with media, society, and politics. Warren (2017) argues that a democratic society necessitates critical vigilance toward public information sources and a skeptical attitude toward media.

Quiring et al. (2021) provide an interesting perspective on the prevalent distrust of politics and the media. They examine two facets linked to media trust: constructive skepticism, which acknowledges news outlets' tendency to exaggerate negative aspects, and cynicism, which encompasses unfounded and occasionally exaggerated criticism relying on baseless claims, such as presuming conspiracies between the media and politicians. Quiring et al. found that a skeptical attitude

toward the media can enhance trust, while media cynicism can diminish it.

Additionally, a skeptical approach to media reporting correlates with critical engagement and evaluation of the media, which includes verifying and cross-referencing information from multiple sources. However, underlying the skepticism and criticism directed at the media, there is often the issue of biased perceptions. The critical thinking of the audience involves subjecting their own perspectives to scrutiny and examination, emphasizing the importance of recognizing biases toward the media (Inamasu, 2022).

One noteworthy bias concerning media partiality is the phenomenon of "hostile media perception," originating from the study of Vallone, Ross, and Lepper (1985). Focusing on preexisting attitudes, Perloff (2015) defines hostile media perception as "the tendency for individuals with a strong preexisting attitude on an issue to perceive that ostensibly neutral, even-handed media coverage of the topic is biased against their side and in favor of their antagonists' point of view" (p.707). According to Feldman's review (2017), hostile media perception influences distrust of news media (Tsfati & Cohen, 2005), and individuals with strong hostile media perception express concerns about the potential influence of political content that contradicts their beliefs on public opinion (Gunther & Chia, 2001).

Ripple Effects of Critical Attitudes: Expanding Beyond Specific Content

Critical attitudes toward specific media or content can easily expand to encompass the entire media. In the advertising research, Darke and Ritchie (2007) found in their experimental research on advertising that negative attitudes toward deceptive advertising persist not only toward ads from the same advertiser but also toward unrelated ads for a prolonged period. This impact extends broadly, encompassing different products and types of advertising. Huhmann and Limbu (2016) found that individuals who believe advertising perpetuates gender stereotypes exhibit more negative attitudes toward advertising.

Moreover, concerns have been raised regarding the possibility that certain factors, such as specific advertising phrases or strategies, misleading advertising practices, and repeated corporate wrongdoing, could lead to a skeptical view of advertising overall or a general lack of trust in advertising (Igarashi, 2018). Furthermore, Lee (2011) demonstrated that critical attitudes toward political advertising and the assumption that others are easily influenced by political advertising influence negative attitudes toward political media or politics.

Media Regulation vs. Media Literacy: Which Path to Pursue?

With the increasing prevalence of socially undesirable media information and growing public awareness, media criticism has become more prominent. This surge in criticism has led to discussions about the regulation of media and the implementation of media literacy education.

The concepts of the 'third-person effect' and the 'influence of presumed media influence' shed light on how individuals perceive the media's impact on others and how it can shape their attitudes toward media regulation and similar interventions. The research on the third-person effect, originating from Davison (1983), explains that individuals tend to underestimate the influence of media on themselves while overestimating its impact on others. This third-person perception may lead to attitudes that endorse restricting socially undesirable media content (Perloff, 1999).

Empirical studies of third-person effects often quantify the disjunction in the perceived impact of socially undesirable media content on oneself and others, known as third-person perception, and investigate how attitudes, such as support for media regulation, vary accordingly, known as the third-person effect. On the other hand, Gunther and Storey (2003) suggest the influence of presumed media influence, emphasizing that simply estimating the potential impact of media on others can lead to changes in attitudes and behaviors. They propose examining the effects of media using only the estimation of its influence on others.

The scrutiny and criticism surrounding socially undesirable media content have sparked debates within media studies and societal discourse. As concerns continue to grow about the potential impacts of media, such as fake news, hate speech, and deceptive advertising, it is important to consider what actions can be taken to effectively address these challenges. This section explores research findings and perspectives to shed light on this critical question, with a focus on online information issues.

Concerning fake news, Jang and Kim (2018) revealed that individuals tend to perceive the impact of fake news as more significant on out-groups than on themselves or their in-groups. This third-person perception is heightened by partisan attitudes, a belief that fake news is socially undesirable, and a sense of external political efficacy—the belief in the capacity to influence politics externally by aligning with citizens' demands and expectations. Intriguingly, a heightened third-person perception correlated with a more robust inclination to endorse media literacy approaches rather than advocate for media regulation.

In an examination that scrutinizes the estimation of the impact of fake news on others, including its antecedents and outcomes (Cheng & Chen, 2020), it was found that the perceived impact of fake news about companies on others is influenced by factors such as self-efficacy, evaluation of fake news as socially undesirable, interest in the target product, and awareness of the product's significance to the individual. Estimations of the impact of fake news on others can influence attitudes supporting corrective measures by companies, interventions through media literacy, and government regulations.

Regarding hate speech issues, Guo and Johnson (2020) analyzed the impact of exposure to hate speech on Facebook on attitudes toward hate speech censorship in a web experiment. Participants believed that hate speech has a more significant impact

on others than on themselves. Female participants believed that as they perceived a significant impact of discriminatory behaviors on Facebook, Facebook and the government needed to improve or censor issues related to discriminatory hate speech.

The growing concern over the adverse effects of socially undesirable media content has prompted discussions on the appropriate course of action: media regulation or media literacy education. Research in this area, particularly on online information issues such as fake news and hate speech, sheds light on the complexities of audience perceptions and preferences.

Structure and Overview of the Book

This book examines critical attitudes toward various genres in the Japanese media. The initial section, titled 'Criticism of News Media,' focuses on an audience that not only 'antagonizes' but also 'disparages' news media. Chapter 1, authored by LEE Kwangho, scrutinizes the manifestation of media cynicism, delineates the factors influencing hostile media perceptions, and explores the ramifications of media cynicism in Japan. Additionally, Chapter 2 by OTSUBO Hiroko delves into the criticism of political reporting in Japan, focusing on television news, examining its interplay with the audience's hostile media perceptions and the nexus between criticism and the audience's normative consciousness.

Transitioning to Section 2, "Trust in the Information of a Risk Society," Chapter 3 by KAWABATA Miki examines the audience's critical attitudes toward COVID-19 reporting, drawing insights from two web surveys conducted in August 2020 during the second wave of infections and in June 2022 as social life resumed normalcy in Japan. This chapter explores science communication and the audience's critical thinking and attitudes. Chapter 4, authored by SUZUKI Makie, contemplates the potential effect of media reliability on the social acceptance of cutting-edge science and technology in Japan, with transformative implications for the future of society and human behavior. It also investigates the influence of media reliability on media usage and information exposure related to cutting-edge science and technology. Furthermore, Chapter 5 by OTSUBO Hiroko examines the voluntary efforts of citizens and experts in Fukushima who grappled with the aftermath of the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant accident in March 2011. The initiatives, collaboration, participation, empowerment, and social capital are scrutinized from the perspectives of citizens and experts. Chapter 6 by YAMAMOTO Akashi focuses on the issue of questionable information dissemination in online platforms and examines it through the lens of media literacy.

In Section 3, "Reception and Criticism of Media Entertainment - Games, Dramas, Variety Shows," Chapter 7 by SHIBUYA Akiko probes into the critical perspectives of gamers regarding gendered Japanese games and game characters,

unveiling diverse interpretations. Additionally, Chapter 8 by SHKI Yuko investigates the Japanese utilization of online communication concerning dramas, shedding light on the reality and motivations behind viewers' online behaviors, such as reading and posting comments online. Chapter 9 by MASAKI Nobuko examines critical attitudes toward Japanese variety shows, considering the "tolerance" toward the portrayal and content of variety shows and the factors influencing such tolerance.

Section 4, titled "Avoiding and Criticizing Advertisements," scrutinizes consumers' critical attitudes toward advertising through the lenses of the previously mentioned critical aspects of "disconnection" (exit) and "involvement" (voice). Initially, Chapter 10 by LEE Jinah concentrates on the display of advertisements during Internet use, elucidating how it hampers the original purpose of use and contributes to consumers' discomfort and aversion to ads. It explores the factors related to discomfort with advertisements and ad avoidance among Japanese consumers. Subsequently, Chapter 11 by LEE Jinah discusses consumers' critical attitudes toward advertising in light of recent changes in societal, corporate, and consumer consciousness. Considering the intersection of feminism and advertising, the chapter explores "femvertising," or advertisements promoting female empowerment among the young Japanese generations, as a focal point of discussion.

Section 5, "Reception and Criticism of Transnational Media," Chapter 12, coauthored by LEE Kwangho and LEE Jinah, analyzes how media content is consumed domestically and transnationally. It investigates how Chinese and Korean residents in Japan perceive and embrace media from their home countries and the host society, employing perspectives of social adjustment, social identity models of diaspora, and the recognition of the othering of host society media. Furthermore, Chapter 13 by LEE Kwangho and LEE Jinah explores the reception of Korean entertainment in Japan and the audience's perceptions and critical attitudes toward its influence. It delves into the phenomena of othering and stigmatization observed in the reception process of transnational media content.

Conclusion: Media Criticism Dynamics - From Observers to Engaged Critics

The transformation of the audience from passive observers to engaged critics highlights a fundamental shift in how individuals interact with media content. Moreover, this change emphasizes the significance of media literacy and critical engagement in navigating the complexities of contemporary media landscapes. The examination of media criticism through the perspectives of 'exit' and 'voice' demonstrates the two-fold nature of audience engagement, encompassing both active participation and the decision to disengage.

The impact of media criticism goes beyond the content itself, affecting trust in media, perceptions of societal issues, and civic responsibilities. The critical

engagement of audiences with media content, as explored in this paper, brings forth complex interactions that shape attitudes and behaviors. From skeptical approaches to media reporting to the far-reaching consequences of critical attitudes expanding beyond the content, the intricate dynamics of media criticism are illuminated.

Furthermore, the exploration of socially undesirable media content, such as fake news and hate speech, raises questions about the appropriate course of action: media regulation or media literacy education. Research findings underscore the complexities of audience perceptions and preferences, emphasizing the necessity of a balanced and informed approach to address these challenges.

The authors aspire for this book to contribute to the ongoing reassessment of the role of the critical audience and the impact of media criticism in an ever-evolving media landscape. By addressing gaps in empirical research and shedding light on the complexities of audience-media interactions, it is anticipated that this will enrich the discourse surrounding media studies and foster a more informed and engaged citizenry.

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