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The Continued Relevance of Reception Analysis in the Age of Social Media

La constant rellevància de l'anàlisi de la recepció a l'era de les xarxes socials

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Far from being a remnant of the past, reception analysis must continue to set the question of meaning as a central issue in media studies, an issue that appears to be missing from current understandings of social media in which audiences are often reduced to a single reality or simply ignored as empirical reality. This paper argues for the continued relevance of reception analysis, in spite of the mismatch of the label, and develops this argument by applying one of its most fundamental insights, namely its investigation of the relationship between media and audience —or between text and context—, to the study of social media audiences. In particular, the paper suggests three ways to look at the text-context relationship on Facebook with reference to its use during the "student crisis" in Quebec, Canada in 2012. It suggests three nexuses that represent as many sites of circulation of meaning in society: 1) gatekeeping, 2) remix and 3) positioning. Resulting from this framework, three agendas are

Molt lluny de representar una reminiscència del passat, l'anàlisi i el control de la recepció d'audiències han de suposar l'eix central en els estudis de mitjans, una qüestió que sembla ignorar-se en l'actual concepció de les xarxes socials, en què les audiències sovint es redueixen a una realitat aïllada o són senzillament ignorades com a realitat empírica. Aquest article defensa la importància creixent de l'anàlisi de la recepció, tot i el desdibuixament de la marca, i desenvolupa la seva idea troncal a partir de la investigació de la relació entre els mitjans i l'audiència —o entre text i context— per a l'estudi del control d'audiències a les xarxes socials. S'apunten tres camins per enfocar la relació text-context, concretament a partir de Facebook, exemplificant-ne l'ús durant la "crisi estudiantil" del 2012 al Quebec, Canadà. L'article presenta tres nexes, que també es reprodueixen en altres xarxes, sobre la circulació de significats i el seu sentit social: 1) expansió, 2) reformulació i 3) posicionament. Com a resultat d'aquest marc, es

suggested for the study of audiences of social media: 1) the relationship between old and new media, 2) the "audiencification" of the text, and 3) the war between audiences.

Key words: *reception analysis, social media, Facebook, text-context relationship, audience.*

proposen tres possibles aproximacions a l'estudi de les xarxes socials: 1) la relació entre els mitjans tradicionals i els nous, 2) l'"audiencificació" del text i 3) la guerra entre audiències.

Paraules clau: *anàlisi de la recepció, xarxes socials, Facebook, relació text-context, audiència.*

Some may say that social media (also termed SNS for social networking sites) such as Facebook are trivial, ephemeral and frivolous. They only serve to disclose a superficially crafted self or the infinite banalities of everyday life. But Facebook is also a means of representation and a space for the circulation of meaning in society, including political meanings in both its broad (all meaning is political) and narrow (parliamentary politics, societal debates and issues) senses.

Take as a witness the role that social media played during the student crisis in Quebec (Canada) that spanned over 6 months in 2012.[1] A hundred days into the crisis, more than 500 000 tweets had been published in relation to the student movement (Beauchesne, 2012). In the heat of the crisis, demonstrations took place every day and were heavily commented on Facebook, which appeared to be by far the social media most used in relation to the crisis (Gallant, Latzo-Toth & Pastinelli, 2015). Caricatures, memes and other images concerning the main protagonists of the crisis circulated amply on social media, which offered a relay to traditional news outlets. Social media also fed from alternative media, providing material not seen on traditional media, and this is without considering the contribution of the users of these platforms. Social media allowed them to share information, express their opinions, position themselves and even offer their analysis on the events that unfolded on a daily basis during the crisis.[2]

In spite of a relative short life, Facebook has been repeatedly reconceptualised to account for its rapid evolution (Gallant, Latzo-Toth & Pastinelli, 2015). From a profile-based media, Facebook has been redefined as a networked media and more recently as an aggregator of content, as is reflected in the so-called 'news feed' of each user. It is especially this last feature that makes Facebook resembles an information media with potential as a public sphere, as the 'news feed' regroups in one place one-to-one, one-to-many and many-to-many communication (Jensen, 2009), mixes intimate content with public interest information, such as news articles, as well as all shades of content from the professionally produced to the personal. Associated with a broad range of uses, Facebook has

become a media of everyday life, a composite hub that ignores borders between different spheres of life, be it personal, social, societal, political or commercial.

Facebook is first and foremost a commercial platform which makes its living by selling audience attention to advertisers and presumably audience data to marketers. In its constant reshaping of its platform, Facebook has tried to find a balance between the deployment of its commercial artillery and avoiding users' discontent (Van Dijck, 2013). Facebook does not provide content but an interface, which allows users to create a profile, produce or share content and interact with other users. As such, Facebook is an open, non-scripted text, whose symbolic environment is enriched by the contribution of users (Baym, 2010), which in principle provides more agency for users to shape the symbolic environment that is Facebook.

But this is highly debated. Facebook also allows the creation of pages or groups, which have been invested by a multitude of interests, including commercial organisations, who then gain some control over the Facebook text, as they can edit users' contribution and often publish most of the content on these pages. Through its interface, algorithm and code, Facebook maintains a certain grip on this symbolic environment, by expressing a preference for visual content, hierarchizing content with a growing presence for advertisers, embedding features, such as the like button, linked with partnered for profit organisations and otherwise affording certain uses, certain content or even certain norms. An argument is made that Facebook, by selling users data to third party, is taking advantage of the labor of an exploited mass (Scholz, 2013; Fuchs, 2014).

Facebook is hardly the first media to be decried for exerting such control on the minds of the many. Especially television has been studied with the same suspicion (Scannell, 2007). And yet, audiences have been shown to invest broadcast media with their own meanings and contextual motivations (see Croteau & Hoynes, 1997, for an overview of that research). Reception analyses have demonstrated, study after study, the diverse and unexpected ways by which audiences appropriate the televised text in the context of their everyday life, identity and sense of belonging. Moreover, reception analyses have, following the tradition of Use & Gratification, shown how media are used by audiences to accomplish diverse functions that relate to their everyday and situated life, for example the development of citizenship (Schrøder, in press). Can we expect less of Facebook uses, despite its attempts at control?

While more research is needed on the role played by social media as a public sphere, it is nevertheless clear that Facebook has offered a rich environment that played a different role than traditional media during the crisis, offering a site for the expression of new and old meanings, shaped by new and old practices, revealing new possibilities for the circulation of meaning in society. Yet, in spite of much research on social media, in spite of the many graphs and stats produced about big data, there is little guidance to fetch in order to make sense of social media as a symbolic environment.

This paper does not seek to answer empirical questions that may arise from the use of Facebook during the student crisis. To this effect, I will guide the French-speaking reader to a recent and extensive research report on the question

published by the "Centre d'étude des médias" based at Laval University, Québec, Canada (Gallant, Latzo-Toth & Pastinelli, 2015). Rather, the question that this paper wants to illuminate is the applicability and relevance of reception analysis to the study of the circulation of meaning on social media. The use of the student crisis as an example for the development of this paper was prompted by the author's own experience of Facebook during the crisis, most of it as spectator. It has been recognised that researchers are themselves users of media, which certainly informs their research (Chimirri, 2013). While this realisation may bring a renew interest for autoethnography (Dhoest, 2015), it is also a convenient way to access data from Facebook (Jensen & Sørensen, 2014), which otherwise remains difficult.

Reception analysis is a methodology of research that has been developed to understand the symbolic implications of the circulation of meaning through mass, broadcast media, in particular television. Some might argue that reception analysis is a remnant of the past in an age where "people formerly known as the audience" (Rosen, 2006) are producing and circulating content on a diversity of interactive and participatory media platforms. Far from being the case, reception research must continue to set the question of audience meaning as a central issue in media studies, an issue that appears to be missing from current understandings of social media in which audiences are reduced to a single reality or simply ignored as an empirical reality. Yet, in order to properly understand the contribution of social media to the circulation of meaning, the methodology of reception analysis needs to be adapted to the current media landscape.

The aim of this paper is to reassess what it means to carry on a reception analysis at an age when the media landscape has changed drastically and when audiences are offered new possibilities of interaction with meaning. The concept of reception may appear inadequate to make sense of the circulation of meaning in our current media landscape, but its methodology, conceived as an investigation of the relationship between media and audiences —or between text and context— remains actual and insightful. A revision of reception analysis does not only concern the notion of reception itself, or of the practices of audience, but also that of the text, which appears increasingly complex, multi-formed and integrated to the audience.

The first section of the paper illustrates the argument of the need and actuality of reception analysis through a discussion of some problematic trends in current research on social media. The second section defines the understanding of reception analysis as the study of the text-context relationship, while the third section discusses the challenges posed to reception analysis in the current media landscape, especially with regard to the notions of text and context. The last section updates the framework of reception analysis to the study of social media audiences.

In light of the fundamental insights provided by the methodology of reception analysis, the paper suggests three ways to look at the text-context relationship on Facebook with reference to its use during the "student crisis" in Quebec. It suggests three nexuses that represent as many sites of circulation of meaning in society: 1) gatekeeping, 2) remix and 3) positioning. Resulting from this fra-

mework, three agendas are suggested for the study of audiences of social media: 1) the relationship between old and new media, 2) the "audiencification" of the text, and 3) the war between audiences.

A NEED FOR MEANING IS A NEED FOR RECEPTION ANALYSIS

There exists a strong parallel between current research on social media and past research on traditional media prior to the advent of reception analysis. And there exists a gap in both which reception analysis once filled and can once again find the occasion to contribute.

An example of this parallel can be found in the exemplary work of José van Dijck on social media. In her book *The Culture of Connectivity. A Critical History of Social Media* (2013), Van Dijck approaches social media as complex, multifaceted phenomena, which require a consequent complex analysis. The text of social media, argues Van Dijck, must be seen through the lens of its technology, its usage or users, its content, its ownership status, mode of governance and business model. In spite of a rather exhaustive account of social media, the depiction made of the audiences —or users— is quite simplistic and reductive, and as such recalls media studies prior to the development of reception analysis. In a groundbreaking work for reception analysis, Jensen (1986) justified audience research along three arguments, which are worth bringing into light again: 1) audiences always make a difference, 2) audiences are always problematic, 3) audiences are an empirical question.

Van Dijck equates user activities with usage, and in doing so she favours a conception of audiences already embedded in technology (or in the "technological text", a text that is increasingly conceptualised in terms of its affordances, its codes and its algorithms). She also admits not being concerned with users as empirical realities (2013: 50), but deals with the *inscribed users*[3] of Facebook, while also paying attention to audience discourse of resistance. In doing so, Van Dijck traces a portrait of the audience as it can be hypothesised in the text, rather than to produce empirical knowledge concerning audiences' uses of Facebook.

A second parallel concerns the interest of this research agenda, and in particular the conception of audiences embedded in such interest. The same questions of power, influence and control that characterised media studies are occupying Van Dicjk critique of social media. Does technology control our uses? Are users defenseless and passive victims? With regard to these questions, the role of the audience is not adequately problematized. Without considerations for the three axioms suggested by Jensen, nothing stands in the way to assert once again the power of the media under the control of a few to condition the many.

What is missing in such analysis is a serious consideration for the meanings that are produced and circulated on social media. This is essentially the move made by Stuart Hall (1973/1980), when he took the questions of power and agency and studied these questions in the realm of meaning (Schrøder, 2000). Hall's work initiated and still to date encapsulates important orientations for the relevance of reception analysis: 1) that meaning is an essential question in media

studies, 2) that it must be studied not only in the text (or its encoding), but also in context (or its decoding), 3) that its investigation should understand the interplay between text and context.

Van Dijck concludes that Facebook users are duped into providing data for the marketing industry in their engagement with the platform. As she convincingly demonstrates, Facebook strategy consists in hiding the industry perspective on sharing as *connectivity* (share data to third parties) from the user interface while maximising the user perspective in its conception and implementation of sharing as *connectedness* (share data with other users). Hidden in the interface, but prominent in the invisible platform or code, connectivity becomes a way for Facebook to generate revenue on the basis of the content provided by users.

While I do not wish to argue against these insightful findings, I want to point out that the questions of power and control are only accounted for in relation to the Facebook text and the question of user agency is not properly considered, as the perspective deals with the inscribed users and reflects the etic perspective (Headland, Pike & Harris, 1990) of the critical research agenda, in which the notion of false consciousness sits comfortably without any possibility for a contender. It may well be that some critics conceive of participatory media culture as labor exploitation (Scholz, 2013; Fuchs, 2014) or as a business model (Van Dijck, 2013), but the users of these media certainly see a meaningful and desirable cultural practice, given their massive interest for social media.

As Livingstone & Das (2012) remark, based on Silverstone's double articulation of media as a text and as an object, the emphasis of current research on social media is on the media as an object, in particular as a technology, rather than on the media as a text, as a symbolic message or as a site of semiosis. That is, the relationship between the text and its audience is understood mainly in terms of the technology and its usage (by users). And the more we talk about users, the less we pay attention to the symbolic aspect of the text, which the notion of audience was always meant to convey (Livingstone, 2004; Carpentier, 2011).

The study of audience, and its opposition to the media text, has proven central to media studies, as the dichotomy brought to the forefront debates engaging determination versus indetermination, structure versus agency, domination versus resistance, embedded *versus* emergent practices as well as etic *versus* emic perspectives. To be fair, it is difficult to disentangle the telescoping of perspectives that is articulated in the text-audience relationship. This puts limitation to the comparison between current research on social media and previous media studies, as the contextual (or social / human) dimension of technology is now well established in research, for example in the sociotechnical approach (Sawyer & Jarrahi, in press) that acknowledges the "mutual constitution" of technology and practice or in Latour's ANT, which ignores such distinction through the concept of "actant" (Akrich, 1992; quoted in Sawyer & Jarrahi, in press).

But these developments do not undermine the importance of the dichotomy text-audience in media studies. If the notion of "mutualism" is relevant, it is as an equivalent to the concept of meaning negotiation already found articulated by the text-audience relationship (Livingstone, 1998). Concepts such as

"assemblage", found in Science and Technology Studies, and suggested to replace the apparent inadequacy of the binarism of the text-audience relationship (Behrenshausen, 2013), loose the conceptual distinction between text and audience that is at the heart of media studies (Livingstone, 2004). In fact, these newer approaches that recognise the mutual shaping of humans and technology do not address specifically the questions that animate media studies. The question is not to see whether the audience, through its usages and uses of Facebook, shapes the platform. Rather the question of media studies, which has been articulated by the Use & Gratification approach, and reformulated in the realm of meaning by reception analysis, is to find out what audiences are doing with the (Facebook) text and what functions this may serve for that audience. Such an approach, which reception analysis can provide, is necessary to answer the question of the circulation of meaning in society.

RECEPTION ANALYSIS AS THE STUDY OF THE TEXT-CONTEXT RELATIONSHIP

Some critics have raised concerns that reception analysis, like much cultural studies, does not embrace a broader perspective on media studies, but limits itself to the question of culture, and in particular meaning (see Schrøder, in press). With its focus on the very moment of reception, a critique developed by Alasuutari (1999), the celebration of the semiotic power of the audience (Fiske, 1990) may appear as a wisp of straw in the wider political economy of the media.

The strength of reception analysis has been and remains to link context with text. Inspired by ethnography, audience research has over the years adopted a much broader and far-reaching exploration of context, not simply reduced to the moment of reception (see for example, Mathieu & Brites, 2014), without however loosing track of the text. What was first approached as a moment, and came to define a particular methodology, that of reception analysis, has proven to be a fundamental conceptualisation in media studies, namely the text-context relationship (Livingstone & Das, 2012).

Reception analysis has offered a relevant critique of both structuralism and psychologism in its implicit embrace of the position known as interactionalism. Interactionalism is a constructivist approach that states that reality is produced in interaction. Methodologically, it focuses its gaze on the interplay between elements in interactions (Sack, 1992). Interactionalists will stress on the mutual dependency of structure and local actions (Hutchby, 2006; Schegloff, 1999). In ethnomethodology, it is said that individuals reproduce structures by the orientations provided through their local actions (Garfinkel, 1967). The negotiation of meaning made by audiences has been understood in an equivalent, albeit different set of terminology and concepts. Apply to the text-context relationship, interactionalism suggests that texts have the possibility to shape contexts as much as contexts provide a site for the appropriation, reproduction and transformation of texts, with what this implicates of change, deviation, new practices, or said in more theoretical term, of agency.

The knowledge interest of reception analysis lies in the circulation of meaning in society, which was problematized as the relationship between media and audience, and operationalised in the methodology of the text-context relationship (or in Hall's terms, encoding and decoding). It is in its investigation of the pair text-context, studied in a relationship of mutuality, that reception analysis can offer insights that are precious for our understanding of social media. It is this core understanding that led Schrøder (in press) to reformulate the aim of reception research as the "empirical study of audiences sense-making processes around media" in order to avoid the problematic fit of the label "reception". The questions of what meanings inhabit social media and how to study and understand them thus fall within the reach of the methodology of reception analysis. This methodology, however, remains limited by the ways it was defined to fit the study of broadcast media and needs to be redefined in light of the current media environment.

A NEW MEDIA ENVIRONMENT FOR RECEPTION ANALYSIS

Today's media landscape is complex, undergoing rapid and profound changes that push media studies to redefine itself. The project to adapt media studies to the necessity of web 2.0 has been thematised by Gauntlett (2009) and Merrin (2009).[4] Gauntlett (2011a) defends the need of a radical departure, arguing that both the methodology and theoretical underpinning of media studies are obsolete, as they were elaborated to understand media conditions of traditional broadcast media.

Audience research is also affected by these developments and needs to revisit its research procedures "as a consequence of the centrality achieved by online space and interactions" (Vicente-Mariño, 2014: 40). In the new environment, audience research methods and methodologies are challenged by a shift towards individualisation, diversification, convergence, cross-media use, etc., and the list grows longer with every publication (see for example Patriarche *et al*., 2014; Carpentier, Schrøder & Hallet, 2014; Zeller, Ponte & O'Neill, 2014). Social media, and in particular Facebook, can be said to contribute to these transformations, especially when it comes to the audience who plays a more active role, putting on the shelve of history the notion of passive reception of media (Jensen & Sørensen, 2014: 145; but see Carpentier, 2011).

Without completely breaking from the past, Hermes (2009) suggests an "audience research 2.0" that reflects on the new roles that both audiences and researchers endorse in the current landscape. Others (Carpentier, 2011; Livingstone, 2004) have advocated for continuity and the relevance of previous models and understandings as a lens to understand the current media landscape. However, the idea to update reception analysis, a research methodology that was developed for the study of broadcast media, especially television, may appear as a strange step towards this project.

Indeed, both the notions of audience and text are problematic under the label of 'reception', as these were relatively well delimited in broadcast-era media

(Livingstone, 2004). The television text was one made by an elite and broadcasted by large and powerful corporations that was received in the comfort of the living room in the company of family. The current media landscape makes it difficult to identify precisely what is the text and whose, where and how audiences constitute themselves around this "shape shifter".

The media text is today a diffused concept, affected by the digitalisation of content, media convergence, the interconnectedness of content and the participation of the audience. As such, it is increasingly difficult for researchers to identify the text under study and to trace the process of semiosis back to a definite text. In a study on the uses of Facebook, Jensen & Sørensen (2014) note the impossibility of knowing the entire research universe of the text of a given user.

The nature of the text as a public representation, and its possibilities for gathering a diversity of audiences under a common umbrella, as in the national audience of television studies (Livingstone, 2004), is shifting towards a more private and individual experience. Television has seen an explosion of channels over the past decades, to which resulted a fragmentation of the audience. Digital media are not only contributing to this explosion of media experiences, but the new nature of distribution of content throughout the networks of individuals sees meaning circulating in more or less "closed circuits" (Merrin, 2009) that are not fixed, but highly contingent. And in such a way that the "text" is also enriched by the contribution of users, if only by the decision to circulate, and sent further in the network with no idea of its final destination, as there is not really such a thing in the new media environment. Only a minority of texts can claim the status of public representations in becoming 'viral'.

Conversely, the audience is changing in the midst of all these transformations. The convergence of media and their increasing mobility result in what has been termed "cross-media use" (Bjur *et al*. 2014). As a consequence, it is becoming increasingly difficult for providers to trace consumption and use of specific content (Vicente-Mariño, 2014). The audience is also more involved in the media circuit. While it is true that, in principle, participatory media allow users to produce their own content, in reality research shows that only a small proportion contributes user-generated content to media (Schrøder, in press). A recent research from the Pew center (Anderson & Caumont, 2014) confirms this conclusion, suggesting that a small number, around one out of eight persons, can be said to produce original news content in the form of photos (14%) or video (12%) on social media. However, the study also shows that around half of Facebook users have shared (50%) or discussed (46%) news items.

The comments and discussions made by Facebook users, and even the content that they produce, should not be confounded with professional content. Professionally produced content follows norms of conduct, editorial lines, production standards that affect their production, content and uses. Even though a democratisation of the means of content production makes it possible for non-professional users to produce content with a certain production value, user-generated content follows different logics than "media logics" (Altheide & Snow, 1979). Bakardjieva, following Bakhtin, compares users of online forums to a carnival crowd, which follows a logic of performance exhibiting clashes, symbolic

degradations, noise in their online comments, suggesting an organisation that reflects their own agenda and way of being (2008: 295). This mode of being is to be associated to that of an audience, following Butsch (2000) who also traces the origin of the concept in the notion of a crowd with questionable tastes, standards and behaviors, or Fish *et al.* (2011), for whom publics exhibit modes of action that are in tension with those of organisations.

When this is said, without suggesting that recipients are taking over media production, it appears stubborn to maintain audience in their position as recipient. Even those who only pass along news content do something else than simply receiving, and their contribution to the circulation of meaning still need to be accounted for. This ambiguity points to the inadequacy of the metaphor of negotiation as it was developed for the study of broadcast-era media.

The metaphor of a *negotiation* between text and context has served as a reference for much reception analysis of broadcast media (Livingstone, 1998). Reception was the site in which the meaning of the text was negotiated, or, as Hall's model goes, accepted or opposed. The study of negotiation rested on a set of theoretical assumptions about the mass media and their role in the circulation of meaning in society, which Hall spelled out in his article *Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse* (1973/1980). Hall's concerns were focused on the extent to which audience meanings could diverge from textual meaning, and hence semiosis was conceptualised as a site of struggle between the media and the audience. Within the metaphor of negotiation, context played the role of a site of "appropriation – resistance" (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998) of textual meaning. This agenda clearly affected subsequent empirical research and can be witnessed in evocative titles such as Ien Ang's *Living Room Wars* (1996), in which the first chapter is aptly entitled "The Battle between Television and its Audience".

While the metaphor of negotiation was an insightful conceptualisation of the mutuality of text and context, it was developed as a specific understanding of the relationship in the broadcast-era media, which cannot entirely grasp the many interconnections between texts and contexts, and hence the way meaning circulates on social media. For the text-context nexus is not onefold as in the broadcast era, but manifold. Conjunctly, the metaphor of negotiation needs to be reformulated around the stakes brought by social media. Many of the notions suggested to make sense of the current media environment —"produsage" (Bruns, 2008), "spreadability" (Jenkins, 2008), "remix culture" (Lessig, 2009), "creativity" (Gauntlett, 2011b)— challenge the metaphor of negotiation, but not the relevance of studying the relationship between text and context, and by extension the relevance of the methodology of reception analysis.

Similarly, the knowledge interest in a struggle between the media and the audience places limitation to our understanding. To make sense of the current media landscape, a knowledge interest in *convergence* needs to be supplemented to the traditional interest in *divergence*.[5] The idea of a convergence between content providers and the audience of new media has already been suggested by Jenkins (2008). But understood specifically as a text-context relationship, convergence also refers to processes of text disambiguation and elaboration (Cerulo, 2000), to the "common ground" (Clark, 1992) between the text and the audience or to

processes by which texts contribute to the formation of "interpretative communities" (Fish, 1980) (See Mathieu, 2012, for an elaboration of that conception and an application in empirical research).

THE THREE NEXUSES OF SOCIAL MEDIA

The text-context relationship needs to be made more complex in order to adapt to the realities of social media. In the following, I suggest three specific text-context relationships to make sense of the circulation of meaning on social media. In doing so, I will concurrently spell out what I believe are some of the challenges and stakes brought by social media, hence providing theoretical orientations to the study of meaning circulation on social media.

A more complex account of the text-context relationship reveals at least three distinct, but related nexuses (see figure 1), which focus our attention to 1) the relationship between old and new media, 2) the investment of the audience in the text itself and 3) a new struggle taking place not in living rooms, but on social media:[6] a struggle between audiences made possible by new modes of content circulation. To the same extent that the study of the text-context relationship was studied as a negotiation at the age of broadcast media, I will identify new metaphors and point to useful literature that can serve to organise our understanding of the nexuses involved in the study of social media. For each of these, I argue that it is relevant to ask questions of *divergence* as much as *convergence*, in order to understand the new dynamics of meaning circulation.

Figure 1. The three nexuses of social media

Nexus	Text-context[I]	Context-text	Text-context[II]
Metaphor	Gatekeeping	Remix	Positioning
Main theoretical references	Audience gatekeeping (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009), Worthwhileness (Schrøder & Larsen, 2010), Two-step flow (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955)	Audience standards, tastes and preferences, (Butsch, 2000), Remix (Lessig, 2009), Creativity (Gauntlett, 2011b), Interpretation (Livingstone, 1998)	Positioning (Davies & Harré, 1990), Spreadability (Jenkins, Ford & Green, 2013), Reception (Hall, 1973/1980), Online forums as carnival, (Bakardjieva, 2008)
Stake	Relationship between old and new media	"Audiencification" of the text	War between audiences

The text-context[I] relationship: Audience gatekeeping

With the digitalisation of all media, old as new, everything becomes a source of content that can feed into SNS. The first nexus is concerned with the content that makes its way into social media and travel throughout the network of its users. SNS are celebrated for their capacity to articulate produsers (Bruns, 2008), that is, people traditionally understood as audience turned into producers of

content. But much content circulating on social media takes its origin in traditional media, either as content that gets a new life on social media or original content "prodused" as a reaction to traditional media. The research conducted on Facebook uses during the student crisis suggests that the young people interviewed produce very little content themselves, but contribute mainly to circulate it (Gallant, Latzo-Toth & Pastinelli, 2015: 49). The large majority of content circulating was not native of Facebook, but originated from three main sources: 1) traditional media in the form of news reports, editorials and caricatures, 2) organisations that are more or less formally constituted, such as research centers, student associations, community media, etc. and 3) bloggers or vloggers. Moreover, even the content peculiar to social media can be said to relate to other texts. Many of the protagonists of the student crisis in Quebec who were "memed" on social media have first found their fame on traditional outlets. Social media act as a context in which texts from a variety of sources enter and are being spread across the user's network, and as such the notion of audience maintains its relevance, as it makes clear that users of SNS are audiences of other texts.

Recent research has documented the role of gatekeepers played by users in selecting and circulating content into their network (Kwon *et al.*, 2012; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009; Goode, 2009). This selection involves a judgment of "worthwhileness" based on the on-line media diet of users, as suggested by Schrøder & Larsen (2010). However, this judgment is also influenced by the context of the social media, including its technological affordances. Facebook has wide reaching agreements with various content providers, including news sites, which allow users to share news articles on the click of a button —indeed, the Facebook button. And hence some of the content entering the network of a user is dependent on the Facebook interface. I refer to Van Dijck's work (2013) for a sophisticated understanding of the affordances of the Facebook text, but need only to underline that users also have agency in this selection. For example, the selection of content is likely to depend on considerations for its capacity to engage oneself with others on the network, to perform certain online identities and maintain a "front stage" (Jensen & Sørensen, 2014: 147).

An interesting phenomenon in this nexus is the role of audience in articulating a relationship between different media, between old and new content, especially with regard to the consumption of news on social media. A recent Pew Research Center report (Anderson & Caumont, 2014) indicates that 30% of the US population gets news via Facebook, making it the main social media provider of news content. While social media may not have surpassed traditional media for their consumption of news, they provide a qualitative shift in the ways news are being used by audiences. Gallant, Latzo-Toth & Pastinelli suggest that the use of traditional media content is often deviated from its informative intention to serve the user's expressive purpose (2015: 64). They notice that users share news articles less to inform than to react and let other users know about their feelings towards the news, their critique or to express their affiliation or belonging to a group.

The Pew study shows that Facebook users who are directed to digital news outlets via social media do spend less time with less content then those who arrive on these sites directly. This suggests patterns of use that are different than the traditio-

nal use of news, expressing different motivations when encountering news via Facebook. Rather than "keeping up with the news" or learning about breaking news, which the Pew Research study suggests are not widespread practices on Facebook, this SNS can give rise to new forms of experience around news that are based on its pragmatic rather than semantic qualities. Gallant, Latzo-Toth & Pastinelli observe that the Facebook's like button is not simply used as a reaction to content, but also in relation to the person who relays that content, as a way to acknowledge the other, the relationship or their common history (2015: 50).

As meaning circulates through this nexus, users can converge or diverge with traditional content. Users can rely on news content to express their preferences, tastes or standards (which are aspects that have always been called into question in audiences; see Butsch, 2000), or they can direct their hanger at a news item to which they strongly disagree. In any case, both the selection of news along convergence and divergence raises questions about the link that this content maintains with the person that selects it. A news text circulating on social media will therefore always have a different meaning by virtue of the user who circulates it through his or her network. Such news 'recommendations' can serve to enlarge one's world of relevance and to consider content, opinions, arguments, conceptions of the world that one would not normally seek, offering a remedy to what Bakardjieva calls "pluralistic ignorance" (2008: 297).

Content that matters is content that is sharable, or as Jenkins, Ford & Green, put it, "if it does not spread it's dead" (2013: 1). In other words, content is selected for its propensity to be shared within the network and hence gatekeeping is intimately related to the other nexuses. The 'spreadability' of content is not solely a textual property such as its visual quality, but presents an important contextual dimension as well. Facebook provides a different context than the traditional social locations associated with broadcast media, and consequently sense-making may not follow the same social patterns that have been charted by reception studies of broadcast media. For the first, Gallant, Latzo-Toth & Pastinelli (2015) show that news travelling on Facebook come from a variety of countries, languages or sources, thus reshaping the traditional flows of meanings in broadcast-era media and their dominant ties to national, linguistic and mainstream contexts. This is not a celebration of technological determinism, however, as the study also shows how these changing flows are situated in specific contexts of users. For the second, Hermes (2009: 112-113) notices how the markers of old (ethnicity, gender, age, etc.), by which media use and content appeared significant, have less ascendancy on audience practices nowadays.

While it may be true that Facebook provides a network of connections that simply mirror or consolidate one's off-line connections (Papacharissi, 2011), it also offers a meeting place for different identities that are not necessarily homogeneous, and for some a place to expand their off-line horizons. Some users engaged in Facebook pages or groups during the crisis, from which they selected content to spread in their network (Gallant, Latzo-Toth & Pastinelli, 2015: 49). Such spaces provide the occasion to expose oneself to meanings beyond the group of close friends and relatives that typically nourishes the news feed and to develop markers more strongly anchored in communities of interpretation.

Much of what circulated on Facebook during the student crisis was related, in its content or its origin, to traditional media and in particular news (Gallant, Latzo-Toth & Pastinelli, 2015). As such, Facebook appears as a space in which the primary text of news rubs shoulders with secondary texts and especially with the tertiary text of audience comments (Fiske, 1987; in Jensen, 2012). The pictures in Box 1 show examples of memes that circulated during the student crisis in Quebec. The first picture provides an illustration of the ramification of the social media text with traditional media such as news. First, this meme reuses a topic that was actual in the news around the same time: the seal hunting in Canada. Second, it associates the work of policemen to that of a seal hunter as a reaction to the news coverage in mainstream media, which rather presented the students as the violent mob.

On the one hand, we may recognise here the old struggle between mainstream news representations and their alternative frames, to the difference that the audience now exercises an active role of gatekeeper, and thus can be said to have gained some form of agency over the means of content distribution. On the other hand, it appears that social media do not ring the bell of traditional media, but offer the occasion for the audience to engage itself with traditional content such as news. Fiske's framework of three degrees of intertextuality offers interesting possibilities to investigate how audiences hierarchise topics, issues and agendas on the basis of what circulates on Facebook, perhaps as a result of a blurring of distinction between the three degrees of intertextuality.

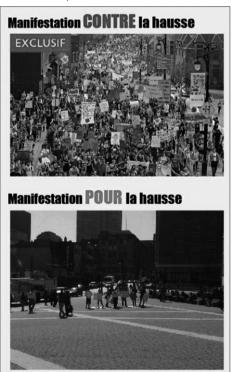## The context-text relationship: Audience remix

This relationship is concerned with the audience made text or with the "audiencification" of the text, so to say. In media studies 2.0, phenomena that traditionally felt under the labels of interpretation or reception are increasingly taking part in the media text itself. In other words, the focus of this relationship is the audience-as-text, which commands a different understanding of meaning circulation than the one made available by the study of negotiation. Therefore, I associate this nexus with the metaphor of remix culture (Lessig, 2009), in which users reformulate existing content in order to express something about themselves. In most cases, it is mistaken to take audiences as producers of content because users are expressing themselves on Facebook in their capacity as audience, and not as producer, as the first nexus makes clear.

The social media text exhibits features associated to what has traditionally been studied as reception and interpretation. The interpretative features that audiences make available through the text can be, topically, associated to what Butsch (2000) identifies as the main stakes brought by audience practices (or what make audiences so problematic for senders or for society): their tastes, preferences and standards. Through the circulation of content that they have themselves created, modified, or simply taken elsewhere, users of social media make their own tastes, preferences and standards visible to others. This phenomenon can easily be seen in the memes that circulated during the student crisis in Quebec.

Box 1. Memes circulating on Facebook during the student crisis.[7] Police of Montreal *versus* baby seal hunters – Same fight!

Demonstration against the rise / Demonstration for the rise

The pictures in Box 1 illustrate the ways the audience, understood as context, is investing the text on social media. First, the meaning of such texts can be appreciated as the expression of audience standard, rather than as the representation of reality, which traditionally defines the journalistic text. In other words, such representations do not aim at all at representing the truth, but a moral judgement on reality. On the pictures, the agreement or disagreement with the standard matters more than its truth-value and it is a common feature of the meme that it invites to take side. It can also be remarked that the pictures do not provide the material on which a discourse can be built; rather they presuppose such a discourse. Second, the social media text also expresses other features known to the study of interpretation. It may provide simplification, but also accessibility and relevance that can be missing in conventional news texts. The memes seem to appeal to common sense and feed directly into the lifeworld and belief system of the audience.

The pictures in Box 1 also show how the form and content of the social media text involve processes of convergence and divergence in the way the audience articulates itself as a text. These processes contribute to the very making of the text, which is produced precisely to express convergence or divergence with a certain discourse. Picture 2 provides an example in which both convergence and divergence are visually articulated in a classic semiotic opposition.

This second nexus is also oriented towards the other relationships involved. Content from traditional media can be selected for the possibilities it offers the audience to invest itself in the text. At the same time, content is remixed in such a way so as to engage with other audiences. The pictures in Box 1 explicitly challenge the recipients to take position towards the text; being on the side of the brutal police or the defenseless students, standing together against the rise of scholarship fee or isolated in its favour.

THE TEXT-CONTEXT[II] RELATIONSHIP: AUDIENCE POSITIONING

This nexus deals with the idea that the audience is becoming the text for other audiences to see. As a text, Facebook allows to actively define and position ourselves in relation to others by posting, sharing, liking and commenting, making it a prime site of virtual, controllable "impression management" (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). As context, audience practice resembles the most the traditional interest of Hall or even the reception of meaning as traditionally understood, to the difference that the social media text allows its users to position themselves towards other members of the audience. Positioning one's identity is not simply a matter of reception of media, as this has also been the role of broadcast media, but increasingly takes place through the produsage and circulation of content.

The old assumptions embedded in Hall's understanding of media reception as a theater of struggle are not adequate at the age of social media, as the news text making its way into the network of a user is not necessarily at war with its audience. Rather, the audience may use news as an ally with which they go to war with other audiences, turning social media into a battlefield for a virtual civil war. It is not only that recipients accept, oppose or negotiate meaning, but

that meaning is instrumental in constructing group formations along the axes of taste, preference and standard of different categories of audiences.

As part of this nexus, questions about the circulation of meaning invite considerations regarding processes of affiliation or disaffiliation between users. The war between audiences carries processes of exclusion (divergence) and inclusion (convergence) between different groups of audience. As argued previously, the audience-as-text invites to take side and hence content may be selected or created precisely for its capacity to engage (war) with audiences with similar or differing positions.

This is key to understand the role of social media during the student crisis, which is suspected to have contributed to the polarisation of opinions amongst the population. The pictures in Box 1 provide us with an illustration of the way the audience is attempting to impose its standards, tastes and preferences as an interpretative community. In opposing two points of view, one camp is attempting to monopolise the territory of common sense, by presenting the other position as unreasonable, extremist, outrageous, unjustifiable, etc. Users are debating about the right way to think, taste and live, not very much about the truth.

During the student crisis, Facebook and other social media became a battlefield for pro-students and anti-students, for pro-government and anti-government, for pro-Liberals and anti-Liberals, for pro-establishment and anti-establishment, etc., to make visible their respective allegiance, making clear, and perhaps even contributed to exacerbate the many divides in Quebec society. Not that these divides have been created by Facebook, of course. Rather, they are at the heart of the social crisis that lasted over six months and have a long history embedded in the institutions of the nation. But Facebook provided a public space where these divides became articulated, and hence visible.

Far from tolling the bell of traditional media, SNS offer new opportunities for this content to circulate and impact audiences in new ways. Facebook provides a context for traditional content to circulate and acquire new meaning, as it is populated by users who change the nature of the communication process. The audience is developing new relationships with traditional media, which are actively used in the management and communication of one's identity, tastes, preferences and standards. What it may lack in authority and credibility, the social media text may gain in accessibility and relevance, as it is a text meant to engage with other audiences. Consequently, in the network-media era, a new struggle over meaning takes place between audiences.

Reception analysis: an evolving methodology

Increasingly in the new media environment, texts, uses and meanings are closely interwoven (Livingstone, 2004; Schrøder, in press), and this provides opportunities for audience research that, without being new, certainly contrast with broadcast-era media. The investment of audience in the social media text allows, to some extent, to "read off audience reception" (Livingstone, 2004) from their online activities, and hence to understand the implication of a media such as

Facebook to the circulation of meaning in society. This paper has suggested three nexuses at the intersection of text and context where audience online activity can meaningfully be interpreted. Consequently, textual analysis of social media can be used to provide indications about the circulation of meaning through an analysis of its selection, transformation and capitalisation by social media users. But these uses are limited to the online presence of users, and can be criticised as much for that reason, so it is still relevant to ask the question of how meaning is carried on by and to the offline worlds of the audience, and here the method of interview can take the relay.

While the nature of audience has changed considerably, and its position as a recipient is challenged, the methodology of reception analysis remains relevant in its articulation of the text-context relationship. In fact, the application of this relationship to the study of social media helps clarify the status of the user as an audience that actively relates to Facebook as a symbolic text. The model developed in this paper suggests to pay attention to three nexuses and their in-terrelations, 1) the introduction of texts from other media into social media in which the audience plays the role of gatekeeper, 2) the insertion of the audience into the social media text, in which audiences make visible many aspects of their interpretation and relation to texts, and 3) the 'reception' of social media texts, understood as a form of engagement between converging and diverging audiences. As audiences play the role of gatekeeper, become textual matter, and engage actively with other audiences, they contribute to set a new agenda for media research.

The ways traditional content such as news enter Facebook, the ways by which audiences make themselves as text, and the war between different fractions of the audience are key elements to understand the role that Facebook played du-ring the student crisis in Quebec. As such, the "theory of social media audience" developed in this paper concerning the three nexuses is certainly coloured by the particulars of the student crisis and may not represent the day-to-day use of Facebook. While it can be argued that crises are often occasions to develop new practices, it remains to be seen whether the practices suggested here are entering everyday uses.

There is of course a diversity of ways by which social media can be ap-proached. In this paper, Facebook was approached through the lens provided by the text-context relationship, a central idea in reception analysis. This appli-cation has resulted in a methodologically-inclined "theory" of the meaning ex-perience and circulation on social media. The suggestions made in this paper are not meant to exhaust the possibilities of research, but to enable and guide empirical research on the circulation of meaning on social media. In any case, the model that is suggested in this paper exemplifies the vitality of reception re-search and its capacity to adapt to new environments and new research challen-ges. The tenants of reception analysis are so fundamental to the study of media, new media and social media, that they offer opportunities for both innovation and continuation of this methodological tradition. The suggestions made in this paper illustrate the continued relevance of reception analysis at the age of social media.

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Notes

[1] The student crisis was a protest movement started by university and collegial students against the governmental intention to rise scholarship fees three times their level of 2012. At its peak, 316 000 students were on strike. Many demonstrations were organised, mainly in the city of Montreal, progressively attracting a broader population of dissatisfied citizens towards the handling of the government, accused of corruption, and more generally towards neoliberal ideology. The student movement was one of the biggest protests in the history of Canada and has been dubbed "Maple Spring" with reference to the revolutions in the Arab world.

[2] There is an extensive literature on the use of social media during times of crisis which analyses the ways these media are used by governments and risk managers as a tool to administer or inform the population in the face of risks and crises. See the OECD working paper on public governance by Wendling, Radisch & Jacobzone (2013) for an overview of that research. In the context of this paper we are dealing with a social crisis that was articulated, debated and made sense in the public sphere, so the interest in social media is rather different.

[3] This term takes its origin in the notion of "inscribed reader" suggested by early literary reception theory (Jauss, 1982; Iser, 1980). While this approach has provided inspiration to reception analysis, it has remained to this day an endeavour anchored in textual analysis, and aptly criticised for its lack of empirical evidence about audiences.

[4] See also the rest of the first and special issue of *Interactions: Studies in Communication and Culture.* 1(1). (2009) which debated the contributions of Gauntlett and Merrin published in the same issue.

[5] In fact, convergence has always been a part of the empirical investigation of reception, and many empirical studies do report on it. However, there was missing a theoretical interest in processes of convergence, in terms of the questions this knowledge interest could help to answer.

[6] While the living room wars refer to the struggle over meaning (Ang, 1996) that took place between the audience and the televised text, it is worth emphasising that an important affordance of social media is its mobility (Baym, 2010), and hence the living room does not represent the main situational or social context in which social media is used nowadays.

[7] These pictures were retrieved from the Facebook account of the author, April 29th 2013. It should however be mentioned that many other visual materials, both online and offline, produced during and after the student crisis are being archived by David Widgington on http://www.printempserable.net/.

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