INFOCORE Definitions

"Media Active Lay Publics"

© *Igor Micevski*
School of Journalism and Public Relations, Macedonia

Definition: "Media Active Lay Publics"

Media Active Lay Publics (MALPs) are segments of the audience who imagine themselves as members of a particular issue or value specific group; who are oriented towards the 'Other' in terms of 'sociation'; who are founded in society as 'natural' groups; and who act through the media in construction of emerging agendas for action (Micevski, 2014).

The concept of 'Lay Publics' is defined in juxtaposition to the concept of 'Audience'. They are differentiated by five criteria: [i] self-imagination (Anderson, 2006); [ii] orientation towards the other as 'sociation' (Weber, 1978); [iii] formation in society (McQuail, 2005); and [iv] existence of an emerging 'agenda for action' (Baden & Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2015).

[i] Drawing on Hartley (2002) and McQuail (2005), audiences are conceptualized as a 'category of individuals' who are imagined as a category by the industry, by the researchers and by the regulatory bodies. While audiences are indeed 'active' in the sense that they actively interpret media content, members of the audience however do not have an active sense of belonging to a particular group that has a particular value position and a particular issue that unites them in terms of political action (political in the broad sense of the word). Thus, to label an imaginary group as an audience, in Hartley's words, is in fact a procedure of 'homogenization' which inflates it with certain qualities (characteristics, behaviours, needs, wants etc.) from outside - audiences are in fact constructed from an 'external' source point. On the other hand, Lay Publics are self-imagined (to use Benedict Anderson's concept) – they have group-self-awareness. Thus we can speak of individuals when we speak about audiences, but we can only speak about individuals-as-part-of-a-group when we conceptualize Lay Publics.

[ii] Lay Publics, however, are not self-imagined in an ethno-cultural sense, but as issue and value oriented informal groups. There is no ethnic Macedonian Lay Public, but there is a liberal anti-traditionalist Lay Public within the group of ethnic-Macedonians. As Dayan (2005) proposes, Weber's (1978) notions of 'communalization' and 'sociation' are useful to distinguish one form of association from the other. While 'communalization' entails a subjective feeling of belonging to a community, 'sociation', is a rational community made in a contractual fashion.

[iii] The danger of 'essentialisation' of the concept is taken into consideration in the distinction between Lay Publics and Audiences. This distinction does not presuppose that Audiences are the complete opposite from Lay Publics – as one group of people against another. It only means that this distinction is useful for analytical purposes. Audiences and Lay Publics do not refer to completely different people; after all, Lay Publics are a segment of the audience. Sonia Livingstone (2005) distinguishes Publics and Audiences, but she does not oppose them for this very reason. For conceptual purposes, one can conceive of another distinction between Audiences and Lay Publics, just as McQuail (2005) has done. Publics, and in our sense Lay Publics, are constructed in society [including the construction through social networks interaction], while Audiences are constructed in

the media [media industry]. Both Audiences and Lay Publics are increasingly mediatized, which makes this distinction vague in practical sense, but useful in a conceptual sense. Lay Publics are not somehow 'frozen' with essential and stable characteristics – they are in a constant flux.

[iv] Being oriented towards the Other, Lay Publics need to act in construction of an emerging agenda, not only that they rest upon a self-imagination principle of identity (who they are and who they are not), but are also are action-oriented (what and how they act) and purposive (what they want to achieve). They have to have (1) a verbal/written manifestation of the intent to change the current state of affairs; (2) a general idea of a desirable situation; and (3) an action undertaken towards building a consensus on achieving it - the idea of an emerging agenda for action is derived from the concept of agendas for action (Baden & Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2015). The Lay Publics that are active through the media (blogs, Facebook posts, comments etc.) to construct and advance their emerging agenda are conceptualised Media Active Lay Publics.

References:

Anderson, B., (2006). Imagined communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism London, UK: Verso.

Baden, C. & Tenenboim-Weinblatt, K. (2015). INFOCORE Definitions: "Agenda for Action". Jerusalem: The Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Online available at http://www.infocore.eu/results/definitions/

Dayan, D., (2005). Mothers, midwives and abortionists: genealogy, obstetrics, audiences & publics, In: Livingstone, S. (ed.) Audiences and publics: when cultural engagement matters for the public sphere, Bristol, UK: Intellect Books.

Hartley, J. (2002)/ Communication, Cultural and Media Studies: Key Concepts. London, UK: Rutledge.

Livingstone, S. (2005). On the relation between audiences and publics, In: Livingstone, S. (ed.) Audiences and publics: when cultural engagement matters for the public sphere, Intellect Books, Bristol, UK

Micevski, I. (2014). Distinctions: Audiences, Lay Publics & Media Active Lay Publics. INFOCORE Working Paper, Work Package No. 3 "Media and Publics". Online available at: http://www.infocore.eu/wpcontent/uploads/2014/11/INFOCORE-conceptual paper_media_active_lay_publics-I.M.pdf

McQuail, D. (2005). McQuail's Mass Communication Theory, London, UK: SAGE Publications.

Weber, M. (1978). The Nature of Social Action. In: Runciman W.D (ed.), Weber: Selections in translation, Cambridge University Press