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# The People Formerly Known as the Audience

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*That's what I call them. Recently I received this statement.*

The people formerly known as the audience wish to inform media people of our existence, and of a shift in power that goes with the platform shift you've all heard about.

Think of passengers on your ship who got a boat of their own. The writing readers. The viewers who picked up a camera. The formerly atomized listeners who with modest effort can connect with each other and gain the means to speak—to the world, as it were.

Now we understand that met with ringing statements like these many media people want to cry out in the name of reason herself: *If all would speak, who shall be left to listen? Can you at least tell us that?*

The people formerly known as the audience do not believe this problem—too many speakers!—is our problem. Now for anyone in your circle still wondering who we are, a formal definition might go like this:

The people formerly known as the audience are those who were on the receiving end of a media system that ran one way, in a broadcasting pattern, with high entry fees and a few firms competing to speak very loudly while the rest of the population listened in isolation from one another—and who today are not in a situation like that *at all*.

- Once they were your printing presses; now that humble device, the blog, has given the press to us. That's why blogs have been called little First Amendment machines.<sup>1</sup> They extend freedom of the press to more actors.
- Once it was *your* radio station, broadcasting on *your* frequency. Now that brilliant invention, podcasting, gives radio to us. And we have found more uses for it than you did.

- Shooting, editing and distributing video once belonged to you, Big Media. Only you could afford to reach a TV audience built in your own image. Now video is coming into the user's hands, and audience-building by former members of the audience is alive and well on the web.
- You were once (exclusively) the editors of the news, choosing what ran on the front page. Now we can edit the news, and our choices send items to our own front pages.<sup>2</sup>
- A highly centralized media system had connected people "up" to big social agencies and centers of power but not "across" to each other. Now the horizontal flow, citizen-to-citizen, is as real and consequential as the vertical one.

The "former audience" is Dan Gillmor's term for us.<sup>3</sup> (He's one of our discoverers and champions.) It refers to the owners and operators of tools that were once exclusively used by media people to capture and hold their attention.

Jeff Jarvis, a former media executive, has written a law about us. "Give the people control of media, they will use it. The corollary: Don't give the people control of media, and you will lose. Whenever citizens can exercise control, they will."<sup>4</sup>

Look, media people. We are still perfectly content to listen to our radios while driving, sit passively in the darkness of the local multiplex, watch TV while motionless and glassy-eyed in bed, and read silently to ourselves as we always have.

Should we attend the theater, we are unlikely to storm the stage for purposes of putting on our own production. We feel there is nothing wrong with old-style, one-way, top-down media consumption. Big Media pleasures will not be denied us. You provide them, we'll consume them, and you can have yourselves a nice little business.

But we're not on your clock anymore.<sup>5</sup> Tom Curley, CEO of the Associated Press, has explained this to his people. "The users are deciding what the point of their engagement will be—what application, what device, what time, what place."<sup>6</sup>

We graduate from wanting media when we want it to wanting it without the filler, to wanting media to be way better than it is, to publishing and broadcasting ourselves when it meets a need or sounds like fun.<sup>7</sup>

Mark Thompson, director general of the BBC, has a term for us: The Active Audience ("who doesn't want to just sit there but to take part, debate, create, communicate, share").<sup>8</sup>

Another of your big shots, Rupert Murdoch, told American newspaper editors about us: “They want control over their media, instead of being controlled by it.”<sup>9</sup>

Dave Winer, one of the founders of blogging, said it back in 1994: “Once the users take control, they never give it back.”<sup>10</sup>

Online, we tend to form user communities around our favorite spaces. Tom Glocer, head of your Reuters, recognized it: “If you want to attract a community around you, you must offer them something original and of a quality that they can react to and incorporate in their creative work.”<sup>11</sup>

We think you’re getting the idea, media people. If not from us, then from your own kind describing the same shifts.

The people formerly known as the audience would like to say a special word to those working in the media who, in the intensity of their commercial vision, had taken to calling us “eyeballs,” as in: “There is always a new challenge coming along for the eyeballs of our customers” (John Fithian, president of the National Association of Theater Owners in the United States).<sup>12</sup>

Or: “We already own the eyeballs on the television screen. We want to make sure we own the eyeballs on the computer screen” (Ann Kirschner, vice president for programming and media development for the National Football League).<sup>13</sup>

Fithian, Kirschner, and company should know that such fantastic delusions (“we own the eyeballs . . .”) were the historical products of a media system that gave its operators an exaggerated sense of their own power and mastery over others. New media is undoing all that, which makes us smile.<sup>14</sup>

You don’t own the eyeballs. You don’t own the press, which is now divided into pro and amateur zones. You don’t control production on the new platform, which isn’t one-way. There’s a new balance of power between you and us.

The people formerly known as the audience are simply the public made realer, less fictional, more able, less predictable. You should welcome that, media people. But whether you do or not, we want you to know we’re here.

#### NOTES

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