Is there room for the fan?
The discursive television audience
in Russia

SUDHA RAJAGOPALAN
University of Amsterdam

Abstract: This article considers the myriad ways in which the TV audience that has emerged in an age of media convergence is constructed across three discursive worlds in Russia: that of market research, popular magazines and academic publications. The central question that underpins the article is how the ideal audience is conceptualised and whether new media have caused shifts in that construct. An analysis of this kind unpacks intrinsic biases and value systems in approaches to the audience, which in turn determine the extent to which digital fandoms and active audiences become a major area of scholarly focus. Coupled with a historical survey of ideas of the ideal spectator in Russia and concluding with a set of questions that underscore the importance of studies of the active audience on new media platforms, this article also serves as a segue to the case-studies that follow in this special issue.

Keywords: Active audience, ideal audience, audience conceptualisation, fandom, fan communities, television, publics, viewers, interactivity, convergence.

In the general rush to delve deep into the workings of digital cultural production, attempts to study consumption practices such as those of audiences and fans have been few and far between. Just how people use media to produce other media/ content either through parallel or congruent texts, or through multiple semiotic, interpretive moments in everyday conversation is a much understudied terrain of media studies. This article has its focus contemporary Russian media and academic discourses on the television audience, seeking to unearth their hidden and explicit biases and patterns. How the television audience construct has changed in a time of exponential growth in the industry and to what extent convergence with digital media platforms has had an impact on approaches to the audience are two questions that underpin this study. The ensuing analysis considers whether there is room for the digital fan in this discourse, a question that serves as a background and a transition to the articles that follow in this issue.

Among audiences, the most committed and passionate are considered to be fans and as such fandom is a practice that has always suggested excess and lack of restraint to naysayers. In Russian, the literal equivalent – *fanaty* – is rarely ever used (a simple yandex search turns up more sites on religious fundamentalism than celebrity adulation). In the discursive history of the audience the most common Russian usages have always been *zritel'*, *auditoriia* and – when enthusiastic, committed fan behaviour is suggested – *poklonniki* and *entuziasty*. Using media publications, market research reports and academic texts, this essay considers the audience construct in these different discursive worlds and the prejudices, biases and intellectual proclivities that they suggest in the study of the media audience.

Before moving to its central theme of Russian discourses on television audiences and fandoms in the digital age, early sections in this article consider the audience construct in the analogue age (in Imperial and Soviet Russia), taking into account the shift in interpretations, assumptions and associations that the term 'audience' has acquired over time.[1] The reason for framing current discourses in a historical perspective (offering a longue durée approach) stems from the importance of studying new media practices and their accompanying discourses as phenomena with histories, rather than as novel habits. The construct of the audience is fraught with a complex history, both in Russia and other parts of the world. As such, any study of fandom in the digital age in Russia would be well served by a prior understanding of how the audience, in general, has been perceived, articulated and envisioned through the mass medial century that preceded the digital age. In essence, this is a question of how ideal audiences have been conceptualised and what expectations have been had of them. Some interpretive patterns in that discursive history continue to be present in so-called new ways of approaching the contemporary audience, and perhaps explain notable absences in that discourse.

Publika vs. *narod* : the ideal audience for entertainment in Imperial Russia

What were early conceptions of the audience, who was the ideal spectator and what was inappropriate audience behaviour? While there no doubt exist sources to examine how the entertainment audience was perceived in early Russia, the oldest sources this essay considers date from the 19th century. The distinction between the serious audience and the audience given to excess (in contemporary parlance, fans) manifested itself in the early distinctions between *publika* and *narod* in the 19th century. The *publika* were well-heeled sophisticates, the cultured segment of society juxtaposed against the *narod* - the uneducated, uncultured, simple people, viewed in celebratory or paternalistic and pejorative ways, just as in the nineteenth century usage of 'folk' in Europe.[2] The *narod* knew not how to behave and were given to the uncritical embrace of tasteless arts, and the *publika* was the coveted audience. A most striking description of what the *publika* constituted can be found in this text by Vissarion

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[1] Some of these research findings have been published in my chapter 'Shoppers, dupes and other types: the TV audience in Russian discourses,' in '*Meanings of audiences: comparative discourses*', eds. Richard Butsch and Sonia Livingstone, Routledge 2013.

[2] Both *publika* and *narod* were, however, sections of society that were far from homogeneous and were, instead, riven with tensions and social differences.

Belinskii, westerniser[3] and a highly influential critic, where he effusively praises the classical theatre *publika* in St. Petersburg in the mid 1800s.

> Not so the *publika* of the Aleksandrinsky Theatre. This is an audience in the real, exact meaning of the word; there is no difference of class in it, it is all composed of officials of established rank; it has no different inclinations, demands, tastes; it asks for one thing and is satisfied by it; it never contradicts itself, is always true to itself. It is an individual, a person, not a multitude of people, but one man, decently dressed, solid, not too exacting, not too yielding, a man who fears every extreme, who constantly adheres to the sensible mean, finally a man of most respectable and well-meaning appearance. It is exactly the same as the most respectable classes in France and Germany, the bourgeoisie and the Philistines (as cited in Melnick 1958: 267).

Publika, in Belinskii's writing, was not only an audience with refined tastes but also explicitly embedded in class; this ideal public was a homogeneous group of people of exalted social status (ibid.). On the other hand, for the Slavophiles (among others), the peasant-*narod* came to romantically embody the Slavic soul and were constructed and celebrated as a counterweight to a westernizing Russia. An illustration of this position is Konstantin Aksakov, prominent Slavophile, who wrote: 'There was a time when there was no *publika*…Is this possible? People ask me. Possible and absolutely true: there was no *publika*, but there was the '*narod*' (my italics). Aksakov then goes on to extol the virtues of the *narod* who are the enduring core of Russian society, and who are needlessly looked down upon by the *publika* (Aksakov in Brodskii et al 1910: 121-122).

But even outside the context of this intellectual debate between westernisers and Slavophiles, *publika* and *narod* were generally considered discrete class segments, with correspondingly divergent habitus or cultural repertoires of values, taste and aesthetic preparedness. The *publika* were a 'people of knowledge and taste', in the words of playwright, poet and founder of Russian classical theatre Alexander Sumarokov (Whittaker 2001, 2). The *narod*, whose cultural development the elites sought to guide throughout the nineteenth century, were described as simple people who, for instance, appeared not to know how to have a good time and were 'easy prey' for unedifying popular or peasant music (Sargeant 2011: 92, 93-114). The *narod*'s capacity to understand literary classics in theatre was considered dubious; in the words of the prokurator of the Holy Synod K. P. Pobedonostsev, the *narod* 'were unsuitable recipients for literary theatre because they 'live instinctively, without ideas; they perceive [only] through their eyes, and they can commit crime[s] with perfect nonchalance' (Lomunov in Thurston 1983: 239). With the exception of the propensity to commit crime, this description reads much like twentieth century indictments of the modern fan. In another instance the Minister of the Imperial Court Adlerberg wrote to the tsar that the *narod* could not understand theatre and only understood 'vulgar farces and pantomimes' that ran in the carnival theatres (*balagany*) assembled for various forms of popular entertainment (Frame 2006: 83). This juxtaposition of discernment and hysterical embrace of the arts is not dissimi-

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[3] This juxtaposition of *publika* and *narod* is most explicit in the philosophical turf wars between the westernisers and the Slavophiles, two movements in the 19th century that had diametrically opposite views on whether the west was worthy of emulation.

lar from the juxtaposition of serious audiences and fans since the advent of mass media. The discursive binary of *publika* and *narod* continued through the nineteenth and into the early twentieth century: In his dictionary, V. I. Dal' states that the term *publika* referred to all of 'society [*obshchestvo*] except for the uncultured [*chernyie*], simple people [*narod*].' His examples of usage suggest that *publika* were both an audience as well as body of citizens that must assess the performance of the state's institutions and actors: 'Were there many people [*publika*] at the theater?' and 'What will the public say about that?' (slovardalja.net). The *publika* and *narod* were, thus, defined by their proclivity for (or lack of taste for) the edifying and elevating entertainment of the period. Yet, highlighting contradictions in this discourse, Sargeant also points out how to many the real discerning qualities lay with the *narod* who were truly musical and 'served as the foundation for the entire mythos of Russian art music in the age of nationalism' (Sargeant 2011: 113).

The discerning Soviet *zritel'*: discourses around cinema and TV

The revolution in 1917 brought with it a sobering view of the arts, one that in many ways shared the anxieties and biases of the public intellectuals of Imperial Russia. The ideal audience was expected to behave in ways that earlier audiences were expected to, but the vocabulary to frame that behaviour was different. The ideal *sovetskii zritel'* was said to be disinclined to excessive behaviour; but how did the state claim to know this? In the 1920s the audience became a matter of concern to Soviet sociologists, who, like their western counterparts, began then to acknowledge and fear the 'pernicious' influence of cinema, then the new medium on the scene. Soviet sociologists conducted surveys of film audiences with the help of questionnaires distributed before a movie show, for instance, but this method was inadequate. The viewers, waiting for a film to begin, had to answer 26 questions in the survey and often the answers were written in haste. Other sociologists tried to do participant-observation work in the spirit of early Russian anthropologists, by watching audience reaction to various moments in a film and recording their responses. American and British sociologists in the same period conducted research into the power of mass consumption cinema to lead a public to 'moral decay.' These early projects were concerned with evaluating the impact of a film or films on an audience; they assessed the social composition of audiences to unearth which segment of the audience was most susceptible to the manipulative sway of the movies (Jowett et al, 1996). This approach to studying movie audiences was influenced by mass society theory of the Frankfurt School of the 1920s, which regarded mass culture as 'aesthetically and politically debilitating, reducing the capacities of audiences to think critically' (Mukerji and Schudson 1991: 37-39). The Frankfurt School of the Left expressed its disapproval of mass culture in terms of its ideological stranglehold on the public, but criticism of mass culture from rightwing movements articulated the problem as one of poor taste on the part of the 'masses.'

    Soviet sociologists, it would seem, used the reasoning of the Left, but the vocabulary of the Right in their evaluation of mass culture's popularity. Sociological studies flourished in the 1960s and 1970s, with the goal of assessing audience tastes, and creating films which

would be accessible to 'workers and peasants' while true to the task of the Party (Kogan 1968: 15). Such work articulated the problem of mass cinema and television (the new medium of the time and hence an unknown factor) in terms of its impact on audiences and the corresponding tastes of audiences. Studies of the audience emphasized the need to acculturate audiences so viewers would be better equipped to appreciate 'good' cinema or television. The development of socially relevant media forms hinged on understanding spectators' tastes; the capacity of the audience to appreciate art was indicative of a 'high aesthetic culture' but was also the manifestation of a 'class consciousness' (Zhabskii 1982: 41-42). It was thus of essence that cultural gate-keepers had a finger on the pulse of the public and were aware of the effectiveness of propagandist and cultural work in society.

The Institute of Theory and History of Cinema was the first to work on the subject of audiences; its surveys established the genre preferences of survey respondents, the percentage of viewers influenced by reviews as opposed to recommendations of friends, the ratio of urban and rural viewers of melodramas, and so forth. Soviet sociological methods were similar to those of their western counterparts. Early projects in the west used surveys, questionnaires and the participant-observation method to assess audience responses to films, at that time a new medium with seemingly far-reaching consequences for social behaviour. The most often cited surveys are the pioneering Sverdlovsk survey of 1965, the findings of which were published in a monograph in 1968 (the first of its kind on the movie audience), and the Taganrog survey of 1976 also published later in 1978. As cinema was the 'most democratic of all mediums' (as Lenin and Stalin had frequently postulated), surveys were meant to assess just how effective it was in reaching the 'masses', or how accessible it really was. So countless studies in the Soviet period researched factors influencing movie attendance in cities and provinces. Several projects were meant to explore the effectiveness of publicity activities for films, and the efficacy of propagandist lectures charged with 'enlightening' the public on matters of art. Findings were meant to help policymakers with respect to distribution and production. But a crucial point of departure for sociological studies, and an enduring assumption, was that the viewer in Soviet society was primarily a 'soviet' viewer (Kogan 1968: 10-11).

> 'The concept of the Soviet *zritel'* is embedded in the wider concept of the Soviet *narod.'*
> Its characteristics of 'class harmony and friendship' … 'must serve as a methodological
> principle in the analysis of the Soviet *zritel'* (Rachuk 1978: 10-11).

By this was meant that the Soviet viewer, a citizen of the first socialist state, was now invested with political consciousness, earlier denied to them in Imperial Russia; the viewer was one who had experienced the fruits of the building of a communist society. This ostensibly made this audience more discerning than their foreign counterparts when it came to evaluating films. Sociologists described western viewers as exclusively interested in thrillers, melodramas and spaghetti westerns and proposed that large groups of surveyed Soviet respondents preferred cinema that inspired reflection and was informative (Erofeev and Lifshits 1978: 32-34). Film scholars and critics spoke of the rich spiritual world of the Soviet *zritel'* and the audience's wide ranging demands. Letters sent in to journals such as Film Art (*Iskusstov Kino*) and Soviet Screen (*Sovetskii Ekran*) were used by sociologists to illustrate that viewers

could discuss genre and style issues of films, and were capable of appreciating complex and sophisticated television and cinema (Kiiashchenko 1963). Conferences and seminars on the subject of spectatorship were held in the late fifties and early sixties and participants recommended the formation of clubs for 'friends of cinema'. It was also suggested that more activities should be undertaken with '*kinoliubiteli*' or film enthusiasts (ibid.).

As an example of how audiences were constructed, I cite here the earliest attempt at audience classification that we know of. N.A. Lebedev, the founder of the Institute of Theory and History of Cinema, set up a rather unsystematic typology of the audience. He based his classification of the audience on their 'aesthetic potential,' that is, their 'level of artistic development.' According to his typology, there were audiences whose tastes were limited to animated films and other children's films. The second group was that of teenagers who exemplified the early influences of family, school and environment in their aesthetic tastes. They generally preferred detective films and westerns among other such genre films. The third group consisted of the '*vseiadnye*' or the 'omnivorous' who go to the movies for want of another form of diversion and those who are fanatical about movies and do not miss a single film. Lebedev placed audiences of entertaining cinema in the fourth group. These viewers expressed a preference for light films, comedies, detective films, westerns, melodramas and musicals. About 1/3 of the audience, according to Lebedev, fell into this category, and together with the first three groups of children, teenagers and the *vseiadnye*, they exercised significant pressure on the formation of the film repertoire. Viewers raised on classical and modern realist art expressed a corresponding preference in cinema and belonged to Lebedev's fifth group of viewers. They watched films to relax but also sought cinema that engaged the mind. The sixth group consisted of viewers who were not only able to appreciate classical works but also the more complex films. Film-snobs or *kinosnoby* were the last group of viewers, uninterested in realism but drawn to a modernism in art (Mitiushin 1984: 91-101). Such findings were often published in Soviet Screen for the mass readership. A survey of film audiences conducted between 1976 and 1978, established that the audience was differentiated – surveyed viewers claimed to prefer films, which addressed social problems, were instructive, prompted reflection and whose protagonists evoked sympathy. Others enjoyed a good cry and a happy end, and another type of *zritel'* went to see those films with unusual heroes and adventure narratives (Vorontsov 1981). These surveys, based on quantitative methods to assess media 'uses and gratifications,' had no room for the vocal, committed and engaged audience. But it would be premature to assume that this audience was either absent or silent, for they were neither.

As Maya Turovskaia has argued the new, more diversified film repertoire of the late Khrushchev and Brezhnev years led to a corresponding 'destruction of the audience cohesion that had lasted for two decades.' Observers increasingly accepted that the Soviet audience was not monolithic and demonstrated various levels of appreciation. Surveys established this fact, as did the viewers who wrote in actively to film departments of the state and journals. While there was a tacit understanding of who the ideal viewer was, sociologists and other cultural mediators grudgingly conceded that people consumed media for divergent reasons. When it came to cinema audiences, sociologists openly concluded that apart from its function in helping the audience form a communist worldview, cinema had the function of providing

respite and entertainment. What they did identify as a problem was that the audience sought entertainment to the exclusion of all else in cinema. They explained these differences as stemming primarily from differences in viewers' levels of education; the audience was differentiated in terms of their levels of aesthetic development, which was a result of varied educational credentials (Kogan 1968: 10-11). This was a way to reconcile the project of the ideal Soviet audience with the real, existing differentials in audience behaviour and preferences.

Television arrived in the 1950s, and while it enhanced the capacity of the state to use media pedagogically in every living room, it also set in motion the withdrawal of the Soviet citizen into the living-room out of the public gaze.[4] For instance, in the early years of the novelty of television the press wrote of the *zritel'* for television as one hypnotized, withdrawn from communal and social life (Roth-Ey 2011: 202-206). B.M Firsov in his seminal sociology of television, wrote:

> The great diversity of tastes in the vast television *auditoriia* is influenced by education and the closely-related variable of profession, and only secondarily influenced by age or gender.

But more interestingly, Firsov even articulated the idea of a *telechelovek*, or a 'television-person', who spends more than 30 hours a week in front of the television. This need not be a bad habit if programming is edifying and substantive, he added (Firsov 1971: 141-157). So excess was beyond the pale, and naturally fan-like excess was concerned inappropriate and deviant from the ideal of the thinking Soviet viewer. The audience for cinema had to be monitored and its tastes formed, but the variety of available film genres and the advent of television dramatically altered audience expectations of entertainment and rendered mediation and supervision insuperable tasks.

The ideal audience construct notwithstanding, there was a very real thing such as fandoms in the Soviet Union, with pervasive fan clubs, committed practices of collecting celebrity memorabilia and even conventions that met in Moscow subways. By the 1960s, journals such as Soviet Screen frequently paid attention to this active audience that was quick to act on its passionate interest in cinema or television by writing letters to the press or waiting for autographs. Journal reports referred routinely to these *poklonniki*, the engaged, vocal audience that was fan-like, and discussed in their pages the desires and demands that *poklonniki* made of the journal. Soviet Screen employees remember '200 letters a day' from these active viewers.[5] Early on, Soviet Screen published letters from avid viewers of, for instance, Indian films, but also usually suggested that their reception of these films was hysterical and not befitting the behaviour of a sophisticated audience. Upon receiving an adulatory letter about an Indian romantic melodrama, a Soviet critic used the letter to address fan hysteria and caution against uncritical readings of bourgeois cinema (Karaganov 1965: 3). But it was more and more common to report fanlike behaviour (without calling these audiences 'fans'), and by the early nineties the press wrote about screaming teenagers waiting for their celebrities of

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[4] In 1955 there were estimated to be 1,063, 200 television sets, and in 1968, 32,481,000. B. Firsov, *Televidenie glazami sotsiologa* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1971), 9.
[5] Personal interview with Natalia Sosina, former editorial staff of Soviet Screen, conducted in Moscow, 2002.

choice to appear to hand them an autograph, now reporting this with less judgement (Korchagov 1991: 11). Reports like these were rare, but it was clear that the media were now choosing to report on the fan-like behaviour of many film and TV viewers/ *poklonniki*, without using these anecdotes as a stepping stone towards a cultural critique of audience behaviour. This discursive shift was infitisemal but timely, given the magnified role that the audience would come to play in cultural production/consumption and given that media produc-production would grow beyond anything that was imagined at the end of the Soviet period.

The *zritel'* and 'pros'iumer' : the TV audience in an age of convergence

The preceding historical background to the audience discourse leads us into a consideration of contemporary engagement with the term 'audience' in an age that is of direct concern to us in this issue, that of digital media. This section focuses on discourses about the TV audience, which has grown exponentially and offers potential for convergence with digital media platforms. In the twenty-first century, Russian media 'consumption', like elsewhere is multi-platform and multi-medial. There has been unprecedented growth in the TV industry. The variety of audience sites online: TV forums, fan fiction sites, has meant the emergence of the post-broadcast audience. How has the audience as a conceptual category changed in the face of the onset of digital media, the boom in the media industry, and the more constrained role of the cultural intelligentsia as mediator of tastes? The discursive audience in post-Soviet Russia is present in a greater variety of discourses than in the Soviet period: the audience is of concern to market research, popular entertainment magazines and academic texts. Such sources disclose a post-Soviet TV audience that is a realm of possibilities – *zriteli*, *auditoriia* but also *potrebiteli*. The active audience of TV and cinema is typically constructed as a savvy consumer, more often than an active user or co-producer of media. Even though Web 2.0 visibly allows fans to co-produce in new ways, the fan or the active audience is still marginal in media and academic discourses, proving slow to catch up with developments on the ground.

The audience in market research reports is an elusive body of viewers that needs to be pursued and won over. This can be accomplished by gauging the emotional needs and tastes that media repertoire meets or fails to engage. In the following interview, the director of the market research firm TNS Russia speaks of segments of the '*auditoriia*', and articulates not only what they seek to watch but what emotions are important to them while viewing. She outlines categories of '*auditoriia*', whom she also refers to as '*potrebiteli*' – consumers: those who value harmony, those oriented towards family and society, fans of entertainment television who are mostly young viewers and those who seek to be provoked and stimulated (TNS Global Russia). There are a few surveys that use the new term '*pol'zovateli*' (*users*) in separate discussions of internet TV, suggesting interactivity. In an article on the growing use of internet for televisual content, the author speaks of 26% of internet use being related to television, referring to this segment of the '*auditoriia*' as *pol'zovateli* (Rumetrika 2010). 'Usage' here refers to the singular act of downloading and viewing. Television forums for discussion and interaction almost never feature at all in market research publications (or any of

the other discursive contexts, for that matter). In general, *pol'zovateli* are consumers who pay and therefore expect returns, not those who shape TV repertoire through their online presence.

The audience's proclivity for the internet means they must be lured back to TV and cinema. There is, in these analyses, an acknowledgement of the role of the internet in changing habits and patterns of viewing and information acquisition. Most market research continues to refer to these viewers as internet audiences (*auditoriia*); yet despite the seeming passivity of the term, it seems the *auditoriia* construct is here not a straight-forward one. The *auditoriia* is something coveted, but elusive because its viewing habits are in a state of flux. The *auditoriia* in the age of the internet is, as yet, an unpredictable phenomenon, not having given up traditional media entirely, but increasingly drawn to the interactivity of the internet. Their habits are subjects of quantitative studies that reveal nothing about audiences' use of digital media as a way to interpret and make meaning. Such a focus on audiences (their habits) as a pretext to tailor repertoire, rather than as media actors or co-producers is hardly unusual or uncharacteristic of mass medial market research.

The audience construct in magazines and entertainment guides is, again, barely characterised by a new emphasis on interactivity and co-production. The audience or *auditoriia* is a composite body with the shared quality of being of a new post-Soviet generation. It is defined here by its spending power; its members are self-confident and have firmly moulded preferences that are a product of their new confident lifestyles. *Auditoriia* conists of viewers with common professional characteristics, class background, and shared generational attributes. Where *zriteli* refers to viewers capable of divergent televisual sympathies, *auditoriia* and *publika* are used to speak of a body of viewers with distinctive, shared characteristics. This discourse on the media *auditoriia* and *publika* is not different from the older one except that they are now characterised by their consuming power and influence. Popular magazines show a clear neo-liberal valorisation of an *auditoriia* that is employed, educated and is willing and able to pay for specific programming rather than generic fare. Note this example where the launch of a new music channel O2TV (*Telekanal Odva*)[6] engenders a discussion of who it will attract; the *auditoriia* is here a composite body of with shared features: 'The channel sees its audience as modern, socially active, mainly urban, with a clear expression of cultural preferences, keen on education' (Telesputnik 2004). *Publika*, most commonly used in these popular magazines and rarely found in other discursive contexts, is described similarly to audience/*auditoriia* as a community that shares socio-economic features, whose members are usually of means. This is also a discerning public, their tastes and discernment attributed to their financial independence and strong social skills, as seen in the same example.

> … the new music channel positions itself as oriented towards the socially and economically active and productive part of the *auditoriia*. Simply put, the so-called yuppies. It is nice to know that this progressive *publika*, which works and earns, goes to the movies,

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[6] O2TV is a music channel that was launched in 2006 targeting young viewers between 16 and 35 years of age. Two years later it also rebranded itself as socio-political (O2tv.ru)

spends time in cafes and clubs, actively sports, has a taste for both shopping and Scho-
penhauer (Telesputnik 2004).

The capacity of the viewer to be able to and be interested in spending money on material
things but also to appreciate classical music, makes this group of yuppies an ideal *auditoriia*
and *publika* with the appropriate disposition for a new music channel. The wikipedia descrip-
tion of O2TV revealingly claims the channel is 'not for housewives but for those with full
lives' (O2TV Wikipedia entry). The audience, though attributed a different set of tastes here
than earlier, is still presumably a body of viewers/listeners bound together by their level of
aesthetic 'preparedness', unprecedented exposure to a variety of cultural forms in their new
lifestyles and a shared appreciation of (or distaste for) for a media/art form. Popular maga-
zines have a substantial readership, particularly among entrepreneurs and professionals. How
the audience is constructed and what attributes are valorised in magazines also reflect which
class of readers the entertainment press covets and seeks to invest in; judging by the celebra-
tory tone of the yuppie-audience construct, it would appear to be the new middle-classes.

In academic discourses, there has been a pervasive anxiety about audiences, instead of an
enthusiastic acknowledgement of their creative production on digital media platforms, which
would lead to a corresponding interest in fandoms. We have seen that historically the cultural
elites in Russia have consistently sought to use media for moral education (not unlike their
counterparts in other societies with histories of public service broadcasting), and in both the
imperial and Soviet period wrote with anxiety about what the audience found entertaining.
Today's academics show a greater variety of positions, yet their disquiet seems to have en-
dured. Much academic work is largely pervaded by the 'media effects' view of media con-
tent, leading to a body of work that projects the audience as ill-informed, far from exacting in
its demands and poorly reflecting on the sophistication of the media audience. New ap-
proaches to studying the audience are yet to gain strength in order to compete with pervasive
and influential 'media effects' school or uses and gratification / behavioural theories. In jour-
nals dedicated to critical thought in general, like Emergency Ration (*Neprikosnovennyi Za-
pas*) and Critical Mass (*Kriticheskaia Massa),* both *auditoriia* and *zriteli* have wide currency,
but they mostly refer to an audience (as collective) or viewers with an apparent desire to en-
dure, or worse – even welcome, utterly banal television programming. Boris Dubin, eminent
sociologist, routinely expresses concern about the media audience and its seeming political
apathy and disengagement. Where the Soviet discourse saw room for the grooming of the
narod, contemporary academic discourse views the situation as hopeless in an age where
Soviet-era style cultural mediation no longer plays a role. Dubin comments on the disappear-
ance of this mediating role of the cultural intelligentsia, suggesting the need for any *zritel'* to
be guided. He shows next to no faith in an audience's capacity to act autonomously.

> In contemporary Russian society, we lack a specialized group which can process, assess
> and comment on the flow of TV-broadcasts for the average *zritel'*, but also for the rela-
> tively educated and prepared *zritel'*. Like it or not, you're on your own. That is why TV's
> endless flow subjugates the viewer to its rhythm. It is not measured, its structure and plan
> are not clear, it is a message without a code. However for the average *zritel'* this is taken
> to mean 'reality' … ; it is on TV, therefore it is real (Dubin 2001).

Television scholars with their textual focus use these terms to describe a, by default, passive, unthinking viewership that needs to be formed into a critical audience with the help of better programming. Note the claim of L. Stoikov who in his article, unsubtly called 'Hedonistic functions of media: infotainment and reality show', asserts that reality television deceives people into accepting what is on as real, and the more sophisticated, educated and cultured viewers have no use for it (Stoikov 2007: 33). In such accounts the media audience has no agency, and fans are woefully unacknowledged. In academic discourse, there is the same element of moral panic characteristic of early 20th century western discourses (exemplified by the Payne Fund project), where the *auditoriia* and *zriteli* are viewers whose tastes are of interest mainly for what they indicate about the insiduous manipulations of the media. There is also little difference here from the Soviet era when avid television viewers were seen as disappointingly absorbed by petty interests rather than lofty cultural ideals (despite the purportedly uplifting content) (Roth-Ey 2011: 203).

A slight shift in nuance can be found in sociological studies, by virtue of their inherent interest in the audience. There is significant overlap in the audience construct between these works and commercial surveys of audiences described in the earlier section. Sociological texts based on quantitative surveys refer to the audience as a mappable body of savvy consumers, fragmented but with discernible patterns of demands and choices. Note the use of *zriteli* in this regard:

> The televisual repertoire appeals mainly to young *zriteli* who are highly educated and competent, like specialists, and who enjoy big incomes, who relish the variety of shows, the spectrum of options and the choices available, the western shows. Those with lower incomes are often displeased with the repertoire. There are usually ideological reasons for this. Soviet TV is their style and the young tastes and lifestyles reflected on TV do not constitute good television for them (Poluekhtova 2003).

In this example, viewers are essentially spenders. This approach to the audience shows deep convergences with both media publications and market research that are concerned with tracing the contours of audience taste segments and the social and economic variables that may affect their consumption patterns.

In the academic examples considered above, viewers are either prey to manipulation or consumers with a willingness to pay for a greater variety of televisual entertainment that includes western shows. However, changes *are* imminent in the construct of the audience in scholarly publications. Academic interest in the emergence of digital television and multimedial platforms is slowly, but surely, effecting a more nuanced construction of the active audience, leading to some important new works. In Vera Zvereva's work on *Dom 2*[7], '*zriteli*' are both a cohesive social demographic of, in this case, teenagers, but also a body of active internet users, who derive enjoyment from interacting with others, defending the heroes of their choice and contesting the alternative preferences of others in an online forum (Zvereva 2006). Another notable exception is the following report published by the Institute of Mass Media, which carries a more elaborate definition of what makes the audience a 'user':

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[7] *Dom 2* is a reality show on the Russian channel TNT, where contestants compete in building a house and finding a partner in the process. Ultimately the couples seek to win the house as a prize.

The internet allows each concrete user to watch what he or she wishes to, by virtue of the interactive feature. Users are able to choose which programmes to watch and when; they are able to, without moving away from the screen, seek more information in real time from other viewers in all countries, make purchases, directly influence events in the studio, and watch other programmes simultaneously. This leads to a radical change in the mutual relationship between channel and *zritel'*, who should now justifiably be called *tele-pol'zovatel'* (television-user) (Institute of Mass Media 2011).

But where does this talk about the audience leave the fan or the most committed segment of the audience – in Russian discourses? The study of fans as a discrete category with identifiable attributes is a fledgling sub-discipline (falling under the rubric of cultural studies and literary studies) in Russia but it indicates important changes in the discursive associations of these words, as scholars now use *auditoriia, zriteli*, but also increasingly '*uchastniki*' (participants) to write about the engaged audience. Take for instance, an article by the late Natalia Sokolova, whose valuable submission to this journal in its first year uses the term *uchastniki* to suggest the altered role of the TV audience; in this article she also refers to TV fans as *telefanaty* (Sokolova 2009: 74). *Telefanaty* appears nowhere else in Russian academic texts. E. Zvereva, on the other hand, writes of two segments of media consumers – users who 'merely' read texts and interpret them, but do not vote for them or write corresponding media content themselves. The others are, what Zvereva calls, *mediapros'iumery*:

A smaller category could be the creative consumer (producer + consumer) or the *mediapros'iumer*. They resemble technical specialists, writers, scholars and journalists, that is, people, producing material and immaterial creative content, which require a high intellect, creative approach and autonomy.

There is no doubt, that we are witnessing the evolution of an active audience from the role of a consumer of information to the co-creation of mediascapes (*k so-tvortsu mediaprostranstva*): from a consumer through the professional *pros'iumer* to the *mediaprod'iumer*. Evidence of this is the steady growth of interactive forums of communication, blogosphere activity, and the use of multimedial resources. Because of attributes such as interactivity and multimediality, an individualised mediascape is taking shape, in which media are a partner to the user (Zvereva 2010, 107).

Notably, and understandably, Sokolova's and Zvereva's work deal with transmedial cultures, where the concept of the audience is deeply complicated and is no longer well-served by traditional theories. The transformed relationship between author and reader/listener prompts Marina Shilina, for instance, to write, very originally, of the '*so-zritel'*'(co-viewer) and *so-slushatel'* (co-listener) in an age of media collaboration (Shilina 2009). All these terms, *uchastnik, so-slushatel', pros'iumer*, convey the nature of the post-broadcast audience and its productive profile, owing to its access to digital technologies. They suggest an audience with agency, call them fans, *poklonniki*, or anything else; but the bottom line is they are the committed segment of a viewership that then takes the trouble to go online to engage with the media content of their choice. By looking at fandoms, this distilled form of audience participation, the current issue is a platform for this gradually crystallising approach in our region of interest.

The discursive construct of the audience (from the *publika/ narod* binary to *uchastniki/ pros'iumery*) has thus a long and complex history that has an important bearing on surveys of current literatures on digital fans. The longue durée is vital to recognising stubborn prejudices and perhaps unconscious biases that determine whether fans become an object of academic perusal today. Placing the fan or the active user of media centre-stage is to acknowledge the transformation of cultural production. It is to recognise that media are not self-contained objects, but become embedded in everyday lives, more so when media have become pervasive to the extent that we live in media rather than simply with it, as Mark Deuze famously put it. The media text has never been finite, and always has involved the role of the audience in interpreting and reusing the text. But in a post-broadcast age, the audience of the media text has unprecedented opportunity to take the text and 'run with it', making of it what they will. Sometimes these audiences subject it to critical discussion, and sometimes it is transformed into fan texts that barely resemble the original form, rendering problematic traditional conceptions of authorship. Further, freeing up production to involve fans is also an indication that the role of the cultural mediator must change in Russia. Where earlier, critics, sociologists and other members of a cultural intelligentsia took it upon themselves to mediate and transform and cultivate audience behaviour and temper fan excesses, what happens now to this role of the mediator, vis-à-vis the fan? Of particular significance is the potential political role of the fan-producer-author, as media narratives are adapted to suit individual political choices. The study of the active audience would change our perception of the role of media in Russian society, forcing many opinion-makers to abandon their anxiety and dystopian views of media effects and to embrace the participatory audience as a significant cultural player in contemporary Russia. The articles that follow in this special issue indicate these promising emergent trends in the study of fandom in Russia.

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SUDHA RAJAGOPALAN is Assistant Professor in East European Studies and teaches both in the Department of History, Archaeology and Regional Studies and in the Department of Media Studies at the University of Amsterdam. Her current research focuses on Russian audience forums on digital platforms as spaces of 'unspectacular but vital politics.' Her earlier work on Soviet audiences for Indian cinema is the first history of Soviet movie-going practices. Her publications focus on topics ranging from reality television audiences to the role of fan communities in transforming celebrity and the manner in which digital media alter civil society practices in Russia and India. Her work is at the crossroads of cultural studies, history and media studies. [s.rajagopalan@uva.nl]