

RUNNING HEAD: Third Person Effect

Third Person Effect in Critical Audience Research

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Andy Ruddock opens his book, *Investigating Audiences*, with a chapter focused on a simple question that students ask of their professors, “Can I write ‘I’ in an essay?”. He uses this question, as well as several examples that are carried throughout the course of the chapter, to introduce his reader to the various ways of critiquing audience behavior (p. 9).

When relating media to an audience’s bad behavior it is emphasized that the context in which the media is being relayed to the audience is significant to any changes in the audience’s behavior that it may bring. Here the idea of the anonymous masses is also first introduced as a way of explaining how a media observer may view the media from affecting an anonymous audience, while distancing himself from that audience in some way (p. 12).

Continuing, Ruddock states that understanding audience behavior is interpretive (p. 13). He takes this advantage to introduce an idea identified by W.P. Davison as the ‘third person effect’ (p. 13). Further narrative examines how the role of the ethnographer can be used, and abused, in the evolution of audience research. Various examples are used in order to explain how ethnography and autoethnography can be abused in order to manipulate their audience, and hence manipulate the behavior of that audience (p. 15-20). Although the autoethnographical studies presented could be considered interesting in and of themselves, Ruddock questions the validity of their nature, emphasized by their use of ‘I’.

Also introduced is the idea of the power of media (p. 25). It is the use of this idea that continues to provide a reason for the fact that an audience’s social behavior and reaction to the world and each other is relevant to audience behavior studies. Ruddock uses Nick Couldry’s compromise to understand that “everyday life is media related rather than media centered” (p. 26).

Throughout the chapter Rudduck is continually returning to the idea that critical audience research is subjective due to the influences of the researcher itself (p.28). The researcher's experience in the world, personal interests, and emotions will inevitably affect their ability to provide a critical analysis of the audience they are researching. This idea goes hand in hand with the third person effect that will be examined in the remainder of this paper.

The idea of the third person effect in relationship with critical audience research is a thread that is followed throughout the first chapter of Rudduck's text. Research into the third person effect reveals the connection between audiences and how they believe a third person would respond to a given catalyst, in this case the media, not how they believe they would respond to the material. The example is given on a teenager's reaction to Eminem's music. While he does not find it harmful to himself, he views it harmful to children younger than himself (p. 10-11). By distancing himself from the argument through his age and understanding of the context in the media he predicts a younger audience's behavior, without taking into consideration a variety of variables that must be addressed before one is able to understand the additional audience's reaction to the music.

The main factors that are important to understanding the third person effect seem to be the idea of distancing oneself from other audiences based on perceived differences and the idea of the anonymous mass whose behavior is predicted. Due to these factors the third person effect is still highly relevant in the current age of media, encompassing traditional media, new media, and social media.

A key to understanding the third person effect is the variables the original audience uses to distance themselves from the unknown audience whose reactions they predict. This could be age, understanding of the media, educational level, or various other differentiating factors. Their

predictions may be considered more relevant if they are predicting based on how they would respond under the conditions of the audience.

For example, the idea that social media effects people in negative or positive ways can sometimes be viewed using the third person effect. A critique may be made that social media can change the way that young people interact with each other, however if this critique is made by an audience reflecting on how social media can influence behavior then it could be considered a third person effect. Rudduck introduces opposition to the relevance of third person effect, including the idea that it is the perception of how an unknown audience will respond to a given media, rather than the reality of how they will respond.

In the ever-changing new world of media the idea of the perception of the effects of media may be just as important as the reality when media is changing so quickly. While these perceptions may not always be true, and may rely on the perceived audience understanding the media as it is presented, the understanding of how people will react is crucial in creating media that will have the desired effect on the largest audience. This is especially important when considering that the media in question may have evolved to a point that it has never been presented as such before and therefore the true effects on the anonymous mass audience is unknown.

The idea of the third person effect and the fact that it is subjectively based on how one audience views other audiences can possibly be used as a note of caution towards critical audience research as a whole. In this case the audience doing the critique is the researcher and they must remain impartial and unpredictable of the audience they are testing in order to get an accurate understanding of how the given media is affecting them. Due to the subjectiveness that

is naturally built into critical audience research it is crucial to avoid misunderstanding the audience in a way that would prove the researcher's own subjective agenda.

References

Ruddock, A. (2007). *Investigating Audiences*. London, United Kingdom: Sage Publications.