
INTRODUCTION

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One of the key objectives of the COST framework as appearing in its Mission Statement is 'Increasing the impact of research on policy makers, regulatory bodies and national decision makers as well as the private sector'¹. The public value of COST Actions is also explicit in the way they are defined: 'bottom-up science and technology networks open to researchers *and stakeholders* (...)'². This is to say that COST puts a lot of emphasis on the public value of COST Actions – they should feed social, technological and policy innovation. The **COST Action IS0906 'Transforming Audiences, Transforming Societies'** has taken this imperative of societal value very seriously.

The COST Action 'Transforming Audiences, Transforming Societies' (2010-14) has been coordinating research efforts into the key transformations of European audiences within a changing media and communication environment, identifying their complex interrelationships with the social, cultural and political areas of European societies. A range of interconnected but distinct topics concerning audiences have been developed by four Working Groups: (1) New media genres, media literacy and trust in the media; (2) Audience interactivity and participation; (3) The role of media and ICT use for evolving social relationships; and (4) Audience transformations and social integration. For more information about the Action, see the project website at: <http://www.cost-transforming-audiences.eu>.

Obviously, the primary target group of the Action is the scholarly (and educational) community. However, one of the tasks of the Action participants as initially labelled in the work plan was 'to reflect on the significance of their research results for civil society, industry and policy players in the field, and provide them with insightful recommendations for their future

¹ COST website, http://www.cost.eu/about_cost/mission. Accessed 28 November 2013.

² COST website, http://www.cost.eu/about_cost/how_cost_works. Accessed 28 November 2013. Emphasis by the authors.

activities and responsibilities'³. Thus the Action also had among its target groups policy makers, regulatory bodies, media industries and professionals, civil society (including community media) and the public at large.

The report *Building Bridges* is one the Action's main responses to the question **why, how and for whom academic audience research has (or could have) public value**. Addressing this question raised important challenges in terms of how a large network of 319 audience researchers coming from 33 countries and having mostly an academic background could make a relevant contribution on this front. In the beginning of the Action, it was not clear how to proceed – even the very focus of the task was rather vague. As a consequence, the Action decided to follow an incremental route, exploring different areas and channels of interaction with non-academic groups and thereby redefining the focus and the working method along the way. Thus *Building Bridges* was part of a broader and eclectic effort to liaise with non-academic groups and create opportunities for dialogues.

Many Action participants were involved in this process. Among them, one or more **Liaison Officers** within each Working Group have provided advice and support for the organisation of round tables with stakeholder representatives and the preparation of 'building bridges' outputs. Thus these activities and outputs wouldn't have been possible without the contributions of Uwe Hasebrink (WG1), François Heinderyckx (WG1), Sonia Livingstone (WG1), Bozena Mierzejewska (WG2, Liaison Officer for the industry), Birgit Stark (WG2, Liaison Officer for the industry), Lucia Vesnic-Alujevic (WG2, Liaison Officer for policy makers), Mélanie Bourdaa (WG2, Liaison Officer for civil society), Ana Milojevic (WG2, Liaison Officer for journalists), José Manuel Noguera Vivo (WG2, Liaison Officer for the academia), Igor Vobic (WG2, Liaison Officer for young scholars), Stanislaw Jedrzejewski (WG3) and Piermarco Aroldi (WG4).

ENGAGING IN A DIALOGUE

The COST Action initiated a dialogue with non-academic stakeholders immediately during the first period of activity in order to familiarize ourselves with their interests and points of view. For this purpose, the Action organised two plenary round tables – 'Media literacy: Ambitions, policies and measures' and 'Audience research: Academic and non-academic approaches and cooperation possibilities' – in the context of the first Action conference in Zagreb, in April 2011⁴. These round tables involved representatives of policy makers (European Commission), regulatory bodies (Ofcom), associations of viewers and listeners (European Association for Viewers' Interests/EAVI), market research companies (TNS), research departments in media companies (VRT, MTV International) and specialized research institutes (International Central Institute for Youth and Educational Television/IZI).

This **exploratory phase** continued during the second period of activity with a plenary round table on 'The role of audience research within mediatised societies: A dialogue between

³ Memorandum of Understanding: http://www.cost.eu/domains_actions/isch/Actions/IS0906.

⁴ See the conference webpage at: <http://www.cost-transforming-audiences.eu/node/97>. The report of the roundtable on media literacy is available at: <http://www.cost-transforming-audiences.eu/node/223>.

academic researchers and stakeholders from different societal groups', which was held in Brussels in April 2012⁵. The panel brought together representatives of the European Platform of Regulatory Authorities/EPRA, the VRT Research Department (Flemish public broadcasting) and the European Alliance of Listeners and Viewers Associations/EURALVA, as well as the European Policy Manager of Facebook.

These exploratory round tables have provided insights into the 'different worlds' inhabited by academic and non-academic groups, into the opportunities and difficulties of liaising with non-academic stakeholders, into some possible common interests and desirable areas of further discussion/cooperation, and into the differences and similarities *among* the non-academic groups. Most importantly, this exploratory exercise resulted in a re-definition of the Action's 'Developing recommendations' objective as it was initially planned in the beginning of the Action. This re-definition had three interrelated aspects:

- The term 'recommendations', although often used in policy circles, was found to be problematic, as it might imply the idea that the Action (and hence academia) is in a position to tell the different stakeholders what they should do – although the Action was not invited to make such kinds of statements and has much to learn from non-academic stakeholders themselves. Thus there was a consensus **to avoid a top-down approach** to the liaison with the non-academic groups.
- Another related issue is that producing and sharing knowledge that has some societal significance is useless if there is an insufficient or unbalanced relationship between academics and other stakeholders in the field. In this respect, the term 'dissemination' was seen as problematic as well: it might imply the idea of a linear transmission of 'results' or 'findings' and does not leave room for dialogue and building relations. On the contrary, academic research can gain greater societal significance if academic and non-academic stakeholders **get better acquainted with each other** and if stakeholders are **involved in the different phases of the research process**, and not only as 'receivers' of knowledge.
- A third aspect that was debated among the Action membership is the **societal role of academics**. There was indeed a concern among many Action members about the normative assumption that the Action (and academic audience research in general) *must* collaborate with non-academic groups. What is at stake here is the critical stance of audience research, which as such does not impede interacting and collaborating with non-academic groups, but should be preserved as part of academics' role in society.

These considerations provided a new ground for the 'Developing recommendations' objective, which was re-framed metaphorically as '**Building bridges with stakeholders**' – with a focus on creating relations and dialogue, developing a better mutual knowledge of the different stakeholders' 'inhabited worlds' (here academia is considered as one stakeholder among others) and exploring different areas/modes of interactions/collaborations. This report, as the main deliverable for this task, is obviously a direct output of this 'building bridges' perspective. We

⁵ See the event webpage at: <http://www.cost-transforming-audiences.eu/node/1354>.

will detail below how this approach was put into play in the very writing process. The plenary round table with invited stakeholder representatives that was held in Belgrade (September 2013) was guided by the same principle: the Research & Learning Group at BBC Media Action, the Association of Consumers of Audiovisual Media in Catalonia/TAC and the Studies & Research department of the French-speaking Belgian High Authority for Audiovisual Media (CSA) were invited to elaborate on the significance of *their own activities* for academic audience research, as part of a panel entitled 'Bringing the outside in'⁶. In addition, the societal significance of audience research is one of the overarching themes of the Action Final Conference in Ljubljana, Slovenia, on 5-7 February 2014⁷.

In addition to these Action-wide activities and outputs, the Action, through one of its Working Groups, has carried out more specific 'bridging' activities. Working Group 1 has developed an on-going dialogue with a range of non-academic stakeholders (including mainly policy makers, regulatory authorities and associations of viewers and listeners) in the field of **media literacy**. In addition to the 'Media literacy' round table in Zagreb, this was done through a special issue on 'Critical insights in European media literacy research and policy' in *Medijske studije/Media Studies*, addressing the policy implications of media literacy research⁸, a meeting in Brussels on 'Media literacy research and policy in Europe: A review of recent, current and planned activities', again with different stakeholder representatives (September 2013)⁹, and the mapping project 'Comparative Analysis of Media and Information Education Policies in Europe', the results of which will be presented to the European Parliament.

Another specific area where the Action, through Working Group 2, has sustained a substantial dialogue with stakeholders related to **audience interactivity and participation**. Through five collections of interviews and essays, Working Group 2 has explored diverse aspects of interactivity and participation from a range of academic and non-academic points of view, the latter including journalists, policy makers, civil society representatives, media company representatives and media practitioners¹⁰. Four of these collections of interviews/essays have been published in the academic journal *Participations. Journal of Audience and Reception Studies*¹¹. The aim of the whole exercise was to improve the mutual knowledge on each other's perspective on interactivity and participation.

A PARTICIPATORY WRITING PROCESS

The *Building Bridges* report as such is the result of a long participatory process involving many contributors inside and outside the academia. This process is represented in Figure 1.

⁶ See <http://www.cost-transforming-audiences.eu/node/1029>.

⁷ See the conference webpage at: <http://www.cost-transforming-audiences.eu/node/1030>.

⁸ The special issue is available online at: http://hrcak.srce.hr/index.php?show=toc&id_broj=7793.

⁹ More information about the meeting at: <http://www.cost-transforming-audiences.eu/node/1354>. An extensive report of the meeting is available at: <http://www.cost-transforming-audiences.eu/node/1683>.

¹⁰ Available online at: <http://www.cost-transforming-audiences.eu/node/303>.

¹¹ Available online at: <http://www.participations.org/Volume%2010/Issue%201/contents.htm>.

As a **first step** (November 2012), the Steering Group of the Action issued a call to all Action members for individual reports on ‘How has my research been useful, or could be useful, for which stakeholders in the field?’ This was an Action-wide call, which was thus circulated among the membership of each of the four Working Groups.

The call was successful: 95 individual reports were submitted (**step 2**, March 2013), addressing a wide range of issues from different perspectives and covering relations with an equally wide range of stakeholders among state, civil society, industry and the public at large. As it turned out, because collaborative relationships with stakeholders in the media and information technology industry were scarce, this kind of collaboration is somewhat underrepresented in the following stages of the Action’s bridge-building process.

For the **third step**, the Task Force leaders within the Working Groups prepared a draft report on the specific topic(s) of their Task Force, using the individual reports as sources of inspiration and exemplary cases. This resulted in 10 so-called ‘Task Force reports’ (one cross-TF report for WG1, four TF reports for WG2, three TF reports for WG3 and two TF reports for WG4) that were presented and discussed in Working Group parallel sessions during the Action meeting in Tampere, Finland, in April 2013.

For the **fourth step**, the Task Forces finalised their respective reports, taking into account the discussions in Tampere. A special emphasis was put on focusing the report on the societal significance of the work carried out within the Task Forces and on keeping the style easily accessible for a wider public. The final Task Force reports were then presented and discussed in the Belgrade meeting (September 2013) in four Working Group workshops with 13 representatives of non-academic target groups serving as discussants¹². The stakeholder representatives were invited by the Task Forces and Working Groups according to their thematic needs and interests. The objective of these sessions was to get a better understanding of what non-academic stakeholders think about the societal significance of audience research from their own perspective – and more generally to create a dialogue on why, how and for whom audience research has or should have some kind of societal significance outside the academia. The Working Groups reported about their respective ‘building bridges’ discussions in a final plenary session.

The responses from the discussants provided the material for one additional report per Working Group – a so-called ‘dialogue report’ that aimed to synthesise the issues discussed during the Belgrade sessions and to integrate the stakeholders’ points of view (**step 5**).

For the **sixth and final step**, all the contributions (the ‘Task Force reports’ and the ‘dialogue reports’) were assembled to form the complete and final report. The structure of *Building Bridges* reflects the structure of the Action: the report has four parts corresponding to the four Working Groups and including each the Task Force reports (one cross-TF report for WG1) and the WG dialogue report.

¹² See the programme at: <http://www.cost-transforming-audiences.eu/node/1029>.



Figure 1. *Building Bridges: A participatory process*

This participatory writing process was only possible thanks to COST networking through the Action, which provided a platform for academic and non-academic groups with different interests, backgrounds and points of view to dialogue in a very open way and on a regular basis.

AN INVITATION TO CONTINUE THE DIALOGUE

Collectively, the contributions in this report address various aspects of the researcher-stakeholder relationships that can be grouped into three thematic clusters:

- **WHO?** What is a 'stakeholder', who are the (academic and non-academic) stakeholders for audience research and what are their distinct interests and perspectives – in other words, which 'worlds' do they inhabit? Stakeholders include many different groups within the industry, the state, civil society and the public at large – e.g. mainstream media, journalism outlets, small and medium size enterprises, policy makers, regulatory authorities, public sector developers, community media organisations, minority associations, schools, universities, etc.

- **WHAT? WHY?** What, in the view of the Action members, are key questions relevant to stakeholders and for which a dialogue or even some kind of collaboration between academic and non-academic groups is desirable? Why are these questions important and what are the resources that research funders could specifically offer in order to address them? These questions are developed through the lens of the main topics covered by the Action, i.e. media and information literacy, media policy and regulation, media design and co-production, public engagement in politics, participation in/through the media, audience and participation, the transition from old to new media, social media and social network sites, generations and media, children and media, and inclusion in the public sphere in relation to media uses of diverse social groups. For all these topics, the report provides an overview of the work accomplished with the Task Forces – including people and institutions that can serve as resources for stakeholder groups outside the academia – and argues for the societal significance of academic audience research.
- **HOW?** This report asked what kinds of bridges have been or could be developed with different stakeholders. It provides an analysis of different models of interaction (also described as tensions) between academic and non-academic stakeholders and of the different kinds of relevance or usefulness that academic audience research has (or could have) for other groups in society. *Building Bridges* also discusses the barriers to researcher-stakeholder relationships and some possible solutions to overcome them.

The report *Building Bridges* shows that there are many mutual benefits to be reaped from the multiple forms of collaboration that exist or could exist between academic researchers and stakeholders in societal organizations, in the commercial world of media and ICTs, and in regulatory bodies close to the policy-making process. However, as we see it, it is important for the advancement of audience research as an agent, sometimes critical, of human enlightenment about the media/society nexus that it continues to rest on a solid base of interest-free knowledge objectives. In some contexts – which appear to be on the rise – it is becoming mandatory, and a prerequisite of obtaining funding from funding bodies at the national and supra-national levels, that research applications do not only promise to deliver ‘public value’ in a broad sense but must be endorsed by outside agents driven by specific organizational or commercial interests. We suggest that public value should not be seen too narrowly as utilitarian, but also as a factor that advances disinterested human knowledge.

Building Bridges is all about the role(s) of academics – especially here audience researchers – in society, which should not be seen as homogenous but as composed of different (yet interrelated) fields. Thanks to the participatory writing process explained above, this question has been asked from multiple points of view. While one could have anticipated strongly opposing views between academic and non-academic groups, it appears on the contrary that there are many converging perspectives – including on differences and disagreements. This new common ground is an achievement in itself and provides a new basis for continuing further the dialogue across societal groups ‘having a stake’ in audience research.