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**Article (Accepted version)
(Refereed)**

Original citation:

Livingstone, Sonia (2008) Engaging with media – a matter of literacy? [Communication, culture & critique](#), 1 (1). pp. 51-62.

DOI: [10.1111/j.1753-9137.2007.00006.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1753-9137.2007.00006.x)

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Available in LSE Research Online: July 2009

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Engaging with media – a matter of literacy?

Abstract

This article considers the continued relevance of critical research on audience reception and audience ethnography to today's study of complex media and communications environment. Although much of the work addressing people's engagement with new media is now framed not in terms of audiences but rather in terms of literacies, there are many parallels between the critical analysis of literacy and of audiences. Both examine the interface between the interpretative activities of ordinary people and the powerful institutions, texts and technologies they engage with. Both identify forms of stratification and exclusion while recognising the micro-tactics of marginalised audiences/ the digitally excluded. On the one hand, the notion of literacy offers some advantages over that of audiences, for it draws on a long history of theorising knowledge in relation to emancipation and democratisation. On the other hand, literacy occasions critical scrutiny, particularly when, as today, it is mobilised in support of by neo-liberal, deregulatory policies in the media and communications sector. Insofar as audience research directs its energies towards the analysis of new media literacies, it is vital to follow the principles of critical analysis, explicating research assumptions, scrutinising how our work is used, and asking whose interests are thereby served.

From “audiences” to, among other things, “literacies”

Understanding how people ordinarily engage with the media, an issue fundamental to communication studies, has traditionally been the preserve of audience research. But audience research has often been held rather at arm's length by the rest of the field, regarded as too “micro” to impinge on macro questions of power and economy, and too “administrative”, in Lazarsfeld's (1941) terms, by those concerned with culture and critique. The emergence in the 1980s and 1990s of a vigorous new approach to audiences, which challenged political economy perspectives precisely by embracing a cultural and critical approach, was a stimulating development, reflected in the enthusiasm with which the academy conducted and debated audience reception studies and ethnographic studies of media consumption.

Drawing on a rich mixture of semiotic theory, cultural studies, anthropological methods and the feminist revalorisation of the “everyday” (Livingstone 1998),

audience reception studies and audience ethnographies launched a successful challenge to the major theories of media power. The analysis of “active” and interpretative audiences, plural, counter-posed the creativity of a locally-resistant viewer against the hitherto-confident claims of media imperialism. It undermined forever the unimpeachable authority of the analyst’s identification of the singular, underlying meaning of any media text by demonstrating that polysemy operated not only in principle but also in practice. It revealed the everyday micro-tactics of appropriation that reshape and remediate the objects of the diffusion process. And it helped explain why the universalistic claims of media effects theories only ever apply contingently, if at all, for media influence always depends on the specific context.

Equally important, this newly critical analysis of audiences engaged with wider debates – the potentially civic implications of audiences engaging with media in the public sphere, the contested balance between creative and commodified conceptions of the audience, the institutionally-problematic dynamic between the production and consumption of mediated communications in terms of both their symbolic and material significance, the contribution of people’s daily, local media practices to processes of globalisation and transnational flows, and so forth. Thus it promised to more thoroughly integrate the analysis of audiences with that of production, text and context as part of a dynamic account of what Stuart Hall (1994) called the “circuit” of meaning (or of culture, or capital).

Yet one may judge in retrospect that these developments came a little late. For almost simultaneously, just as this new approach to audiences was gaining confidence, developing its methods, participating in wider debates and building up a body of empirical work, the very concept of “audience” was losing purchase. The notion of the mass media audience, especially, has been unravelling in academic debate as both mass society and mass media have themselves been transformed, demanding more complex analyses of people’s engagement with media. The “audience” was first made (rightly, but still perhaps confusingly) plural and diverse (“audiences”), then transformed (to counter charges of reductionism and reification) from a noun to a verb (“audiencing”; Fiske 1992), and increasingly supplanted (by “publics”, “users”, “consumers”, “community” or, simply, “people), partly to evade the accusation of exaggerating and so over-celebrating, audience activity but also, more importantly, it has been rethought in order to reconnect the supposedly private activities of audiences to the public contexts of everyday life.

Beyond these academic deliberations, and perhaps more significantly, the term “audience” has become less workable in ordinary discourse. In a context of media diversification, convergence and complexity, the notion of the “audience” only poorly describes people’s engagement with today’s media and communication environment. Those who use the internet, mobile phones, digital games, and even those who engage with traditional media (radio, print, television) via the internet, are not easily labelled an audience. The term “user” is, it seems, becoming commonplace in ordinary discourse, but this is equally unsatisfactory, for it lacks any direct relation to communication in particular, and it implies an instrumental individualism rather than a collective, even public, status (Livingstone, 2005) which renders it particularly intractable for critical analysis.

Subtly, it seems, many questions traditionally asked of audience research are being reframed. Critical audience studies are migrating into intellectual inquiry focused on participation (developing the stress on processes of interactive engagement with new media, and so generating analyses of “user-generated content”, fan creativity, citizens’ media, and dispersed forms of audience interactivity), globalisation (developing the stress on diversity according to context, on the relation between political economy and cultural studies, and generating analyses of processes of “glocalisation”, diasporic and transnational media audiences), domestication (integrating audience studies with consumption studies, albeit concerned less with people’s engagement with media qua texts than with their engagement with media qua consumer goods), and a renewed interest in youth culture (since in relation to new media, young people are claimed to be pioneers in a way little claimed for mass media).

There is, however, another prominent reframing, that of “literacy”. It would seem that, in our everyday talk – in the academy but also in public and policy discourses – this alternative is gaining ascendancy, in key ways taking over the ground where audience studies once held sway. Everywhere, it seems, we hear of cyber-literacy, digital literacy, computer literacy, media literacy, internet literacy, network literacy and so on, and this, it seems, points to a new discourse whereby the academy can examine, critically or otherwise, the ways in which people ordinarily engage, creatively or otherwise, with media and communication technologies. Is this, one must ask, a useful new direction? What are the advantages, and are there any

pitfalls, of reframing the analysis of people's engagement with media in terms of literacy?

I do not here mean to disparage the merits of these emerging research foci, or to disavow the value of terms proposed as alternatives to "audiences". Rather, my concern is that we do not lose the theoretical and empirical insights hitherto gathered under the label of "audience research", especially since there are some strong continuities – in terms of the themes, arguments and critical problematics – with current discussions of media and digital literacies. Hence, my purpose in this essay is two-fold. First, and briefly, I shall sketch the parallels and continuities between critical approaches to media audiences and to media literacies. Second, I problematise the focus on media literacies as one way forward, by observing the rise of an influential administrative and instrumental approach to media literacy. I conclude by suggesting that both terms – audience and literacy – should remain central to the critical analysis of people's engagement with media, for each has both conceptual and heuristic value, particularly compared with rival concepts, but that we must also actively recognise and contest the ways in which these terms can be used and abused, especially within policy circles.

Media audiences, media literacies – intriguing parallels

Critical audience studies argued, first, that audiences must interpret what they see even to construct (or decode) the message as meaningful and orderly, however routine this interpretation may be. Second, they argued that interpretation is far from unconstrained, being afforded by both generic (medium and genre-based) and specific (programme-based) conventions of the text, this being itself more or less open, in semiotic terms, to multiple readings. Third, the experience of viewing, it was held, is socially and culturally located, so that viewers' everyday concerns, experiences and knowledge become a crucial resource (albeit often unpredictable from the producers' viewpoint, but nonetheless culturally and socially determined) that shapes the interpretative process of viewing. Fourth, it was shown that, as a consequence, audiences diverge in their interpretations, generating different – sometimes playful, sometimes critical, always contextually meaningful - readings of the same media text in practice.

Of especial importance, noted earlier as posing a key challenge to then-dominant theories of media power, was the way in which these arguments enabled

recognition of the critical and resistant activities of the public in engaging with media texts. With hindsight, one might ask whether this was, really, research on critical literacy? Critical literacy, like critical viewing, represents a form of everyday defence, or a site of interpretative resistance, against the standardized, commodified message of “the culture industries” (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1977). It is informed by critical knowledge of that industry and by recognition of the interests at stake, especially insofar as these differ from the interests of the ordinary public. And it draws on the broader critical literacies required, as Paulo Friere argued, to “read the world” as thoughtful and engaged citizens (Freire & Macedo, 1987).

Audience research did not only identify ways in which audiences are critical, it also explored their creative re-appropriation of given or dominant meanings, including their playful engagement with media texts as they reshape them to suit the circumstances and values of their daily lives. In the context of late modernity, with its stress on reflexive identities, the biographisation of the life course and the disembedding of tradition (Giddens, 1991), this creative re-appropriate merits our critical interest. Yet this interest, also, has its parallel in research on literacy: consider Henry Jenkins’ (1992) analysis of the creative interplay between the literacies required to interpret and to produce fan fiction or Jim Gee’s (2003) linking of identity development and new media literacies for young video games players. Indeed, “literacy”, more than “audiences”, suits a converged environment in which the lines between leisure and learning, public and private, or work and play are increasingly, and productively, blurred. Hence research on critical and creative literacies is to be found not only in disciplines concerned with mediated entertainment, but also in those concerned with education, work and social inclusion (Kellner, 2002; Kress, 2003; Warschauer, 2003).

Indeed, herein lies a challenge for audience – and media – researchers, for while critical audiences remained our preserve in media and communications, an interest in critical citizens, or literate citizens, is the business also of sociologists, political scientists, information specialists, educationalists and more, this necessarily widening our theoretical purview and sphere of engagement, and requiring of us a sharper account of our particular expertise or contribution. The power of the text-reader metaphor, as extended from print media first to audiovisual and then to multi-media texts, is surely central to this contribution, especially when located as one moment, one vital point of articulation, in a wider circuit of culture. This metaphor,

with its repertoire of hermeneutic concepts (polysemy, genre, textual openness and closure/preferred readings, encoding and decoding, inter- and trans-textuality, and so forth), brings to the fore that valuable (but too easily overlooked) interpretative space between technological (or textual) and social determinisms, necessary both to conduct academic critical analysis and to recognise the critical analysis of audiences and publics in everyday life.

Herein lies a strength also in the concept of literacy, significant since, just as “audience” has its competing terms in this well-populated semantic space, so too does “literacy” – “competence”, “capability”, (social/cultural) capital and, especially, “skill”. I suggest that it is the link to the hermeneutic analysis of texts (including technologies as texts; Woolgar, 1996) that renders “literacy” preferable to its alternatives, for “literacy”, like “audience”, is an interface concept, one that points to the necessarily mutual connection between interpreter and that which is interpreted. In the domain of reception aesthetics, this is theorised as the relation between implied and empirical readers (Iser, 1980), or virtual and actualised texts (Eco, 1979). Similarly, in relation to print literacy, literate readers require legible texts, an argument now being applied to the online environment through a critical analysis of how these enable, direct or impede particular interpretations by users (Burbules, 1998; Snyder, Angus, & Sutherland-Smith, 2004).

So, this mutuality between text and reader is central to understanding the interpretation of both old (or mass) and new (or interactive) media. Only thus can we understand how viewers interpret, diverge from, confirm to or re-create meanings in the process of engaging with media, and so such an analysis suggests some fascinating directions for researching people’s engagement with new media also (Livingstone 2004a), thereby revealing what is increasingly termed their media literacy. However, if we conceptualise people’s engagement with new media texts in terms of competencies or skills rather than literacy, the question of whether the texts themselves enable or impede creative, critical or useful interpretations becomes obscured. This undermines, in turn, the analysis of what Jensen and Helles (2005) call the “politics of interactivity” – in other words, the analysis of whether society has so constructed certain resources, or so positioned particular groups, as to undermine or restrict the knowledge or opportunities available to them – and results, problematically, in the force of any critique of new media uses being turned onto the user (as gullible, naïve, unskilled or incompetent) rather than onto the provider (for

producing biased, incoherent, manipulative or inadequate texts) (Livingstone, van Couvering, & Thumim, in press).

However, unlike in relation to mass communication, the new media environment invites also a text-writer metaphor; here, it must be said, “literacy” serves better than “audience”. Literacy includes writing as well as reading, a point long argued by historians concerned that writing, even more than reading, has been regulated by the state (and church) so as to restrict rather than extend literacy among the general public (Luke 1989). So, even though the argument for the active television audience was taken as far as possible, the critical potential of audiences’ activity and interactivity remained relatively marginal compared with audiences’ considerable acceptance of dominant mass media in the last century. By contrast, “recent digital technologies have radically enhanced these kinds of interactivity by explicitly emphasizing the user’s response and active assistance in the formation of the media text itself and by developing particular tools to facilitate this” (Fornäs, Klein, Ladendorf, Sunden, & Svenigsson, 2002: 23).

Media literacy – critical doubts

Yet even as we place people’s interpretative activities at the very centre of new media design and use, paying as much attention to the literacies of creative production (“writing”) as to those of reception (or “reading”), we should note that the widespread significance of everyday creative practices remains more claimed than proven. In avoiding any over-celebration of people’s potential creativity in engaging with Web 2.0 and other digital opportunities, the history of the governance of print literacy, subject as it was to many regulatory, moral and commercial restrictions and exclusions, is surely useful as we undertake critical analysis of such developing phenomena as citizen journalism, participatory online media and user-generated content. And this leads me to consider the reasons to doubt the merits of media or digital “literacy” as a way of framing society’s ambitions regarding people’s engagement with media, even though the term “literacy” captures these ambitions – for better than that of “audience” (indeed one hardly had ambitions, rather one had fears, for “audiences”).

Literacy, historically, has represented a focus for many of society’s ambitions regarding people’s opportunities for learning, expression, creativity, public connection, civic participation and critical judgement; in short, literacy is seen as a

route to emancipation. Media, cyber- and digital literacies, similarly, are now the focus for society's hopes that digital technologies, like those of print before them, can realise similar ambitions. But literacy also occasions considerable concerns. The term is widely incorporated into processes of governance, being built into educational curricula, part of the skills required for a competitive labour market, co-opted as part of the legitimation of neo-liberal market deregulation ("empowered consumers" need less protection or regulated provision), and contributing to the discourse that excludes certain segments of society (as "illiterate") as well as that which includes, and further privileges, the already-information rich. Moreover, a fair body of research, often uncritically supportive of instrumental and administrative goals, has been developed within the academy to furnish evidence to establish standards and measure progression in relation to "information literacy", for example, or inform the curricula of training programmes for ICT literacy in the workplace (c.f. Livingstone, van Couvering & Thumim, in press).

Here too, the parallel with audience research holds up, for the volume and prominence of administrative research on audiences has always exceeded that of the critical tradition, with much research that claims to identify new and "unmet" audience "needs", to propose typologies to guide the targeting of new products, and to "test" audience reactions to commercial or public policy messages. Critics of this work include Ien Ang's (1990) Foucauldian account of the audience ratings industry's "desperate search for the audience", and Dallas Smythe's (1981) construction of "the audience" as a reified category commodified by and for the media industry. It is noteworthy, then, that equally strong critiques have been developed in relation to literacy – witness Carmen Luke's (1989) Foucault-inspired history of print literacy and its close connections to pedagogy and Protestantism in Europe. Parallels in relation to new media literacies are evident today. Consider, for example, what David Buckingham (2001) terms the "curricularisation of leisure", especially for children, centred on "edutainment" technologies; see also David Oswell's (1999) account of how "good parenting" requires the moral management of domestic media.

So, does the term "literacy" do the critical work we require of it, or does it instead perpetuate traditional inequalities? Raymond Williams' (1983) account of the origins of the term is instructive here, for "literacy", he shows, derives not from reading and writing, or being "good with books" or knowing one's ABC (as is the case in many languages) but from "literature". It became necessary as a distinct term

only when print literacy had achieved mass reach during the late nineteenth century, for only then would the previous term, “literary”, no longer suffice (since the population that could now read and write simply could not be described as literary – they were not discerning and knowledgeable according to “standards of polite learning”, and they lacked an appreciation of literary canon). In short, “literacy”, “was a new word invented to express the achievement and possession of what were increasingly seen as general and necessary skills” (Williams 1983: 188), to be valued by society but, insofar as knowledge could now spread beyond the elite, also to be carefully regulated (Livingstone, 2004b). In the new media and communication environment, we may therefore expect the optimistic claims for ICT’s democratisation of knowledge to go hand in hand with the rise of regulatory scrutiny of new media technologies. Intriguingly, both sides employ the term “literacy” in advocating their cause.

One might argue that, if our task is that of identifying the emancipatory potential of new media, and critiquing the social and technological impediments to such potential, one would do well wish to avoid the connotations of this opaque, contested term, “literacy”, with its origins in high culture, its stuffy association with the world of authoritative printed books and its tendency to stigmatize those who lack it. On the other hand, this would mean turning away from the ambitious body of work concerned precisely to democratise access to knowledge and participation in new media and communication environments, thus failing to capitalise on well-established work in critical pedagogy regarding critical and creative literacies, ignoring the attempt of the “new literacies” movement to recognise literacy as a potentially emancipatory social and cultural practice rather than an individualistic skill (Street 1995) and, lastly, eschewing rather than directly engaging with the policy impetus already mobilised to spread literacy, including media literacy, more widely.

A view from outside

This may all seem a very academic discussion. But two developments outside the academy broaden the focus and, arguably, take control of the agenda. These are, first, the promotion of media literacy as a new policy tool – in the UK and Europe, perhaps elsewhere also, and second, an explosion in the varieties of literacy in everyday public and media discourse.

As to the first, it is noteworthy that Ofcom, the UK's new communications regulator established in 2003, gained a legal duty to promote media literacy (notwithstanding some conceptual lack of clarity regarding the definition of this term). Yet since Ofcom was set up primarily as an economic regulator, a critical reading would suggest the underlying goal to be that of supporting economic competition by increasing consumer knowledge and awareness while also legitimating the reduction of top-down regulatory intervention. Ofcom's promotion of media literacy may, read critically, contribute to the broader shift from direct control by government to governance through "action at a distance" characteristic of neoliberal market economies, this explaining why most of its attention is devoted to matters of basic access and simple skills relating to ICT use rather than more ambitious expectations regarding critical and creative media literacies. Yet at the same time, one surely wishes to recognize the good intentions underlying, say, the Council of Europe's (2005) ambition to "give special encouragement to training for children in media literacy, enabling them to benefit from the positive aspects of the new communication services and avoid exposure to harmful content".

So, one key question facing the academy, is whether and how to engage with these new initiatives to promote media literacy. Of course, many have taken up this challenge over the years, coming from both critical and administrative traditions, drawing on both media and communications and on pedagogy, and they have encountered both problems and successes along the way (Hobbs 1998). Many others, however, avoid this field, refusing to translate their work on audiences into practical guidance, media production initiatives, media education curricula, policy advice and so forth, partly out of skepticism regarding the normative goals at issue, partly because retaining some control over the agenda can be difficult.

A LexisNexis search of the UK press, conducted over the past two decades, reveals that "media literacy" reached the public agenda not as part of the concern to educate critical citizens, nor as the outcome of lobbying by academics researching media audiences, but rather as part of the solution for neoliberal governments faced with the challenge of regulating a fast-diversifying media and communications environment. In what was an intriguing and, to many, a surprising and even confusing move, the UK's Communications Act 2003 required that the new converged regulator, Ofcom, "promote media literacy". In the UK press, media literacy became linked to communication policy, gaining an unprecedented 13 references in 2003

(rising to 16 each in 2005 and 2006), now encompassing adults as well as children, and justified in these terms: “the proliferation of new media has made policing the content increasingly impractical and impracticable” at the same time as the public is “Baffled by the new digital world” (*Sunday Times*, 11 July 2004, p.10) and “Britons need lessons in watching TV says Jowell” (*The Daily Mail*, 21 January 2004, p.23). As Tessa Jowell, then Minister of State for Culture, Media and Sport, said, “if people can take greater personal responsibility for what they watch and listen to, that will in itself lessen the need for regulatory intervention.” (cited in *The Daily Mail*, 21 January 2004, p. 23)

But we must look even beyond public policy in media and communication, to recognize and understand why “literacy” is suddenly on the public agenda. A LexisNexis search of the UK press for first two months of 2007 revealed 243 references to print literacy, 15 references to financial literacy, five for scientific literacy, four each for ICT/computer literacy and emotional literacy, two each for spatial literacy and Gaelic literacy, and one each for political literacy, technical literacy, film literacy, media literacy, Catalan literacy and theological literacy. An online search added further terms – ethical literacy, environmental literacy, information literacy, health literacy and, of course, critical literacy.

Significantly, well before “media literacy” entered the UK’s Communications Act, “health literacy” and “financial literacy” had already reached the policy agenda. Health literacy illustrates the policy dilemma well. Its earliest mention in the UK came in 1994 when the Conservative Secretary of State for Health, Virginia Bottomley, “emphasised the importance of encouraging greater health literacy in the population” in the context of a review of how developed countries could set priorities to ration health care in the face of rapidly rising costs.¹ Two contrasting articles illustrate the various discussions that followed. One, a report in the (Conservative) *Financial Times* that the American drug company, Pfizer, “is in talks with the state of Texas about a controversial scheme to fund patient education in return for fewer price controls on its drugs”, building on its successful negotiation with Jeb Bush, state governor of Florida, to finance health literacy and save millions of dollars from mandatory price rebates (*Financial Times*, 18 February 2003, p. 1). Second, a report from the Communist Party’s paper, *The Morning Star*, reporting union activists’ concern, backed by the National Consumer Council, that the (Labour) Government’s proposal to allow “patient choice” regarding hospitals would increase “the gulf in

“health literacy” between higher and lower social groups” (*Morning Star*, 4 August 2004, p. 4) The two stories could not be more different, the one illustrating how “literacy” can be mobilised to reduce business costs by promoting “empowerment” among consumers, the second using the term to point to the importance of inequalities in knowledge resources over and above inequalities in financial resources.

Conclusion

The opportunities and risks afforded by the changing media and communication environment may be usefully analysed using any of a range of concepts and metaphors, whether referring to people themselves (as audiences, publics, consumers, communities or users) or to the process of engagement (as literate, interpretative, critical, etc). This paper has argued for the continued relevance of the insights of critical audience research as we widen our focus from the twentieth century study of active and interpretive mass television audiences to encompass today’s study of interactive, multimedia, dispersed and mobile audiences. The specific approach epitomised by the text-reader metaphor - which brings together semiotics with the materiality of media, political economy questions with cultural studies insights, and which reintegrates, as part of a circuit of culture, the micro contexts of meaning appropriation with macro processes of media and cultural power - remains pertinent for today’s convergent and yet fragmented, globalised and yet more localised, more individualised and more commodified media and communication environment, and it can be productively developed further in relation to creating (or writing) as well as interpreting (or reading) texts, given the rise of interactive communication opportunities.

However, this paper has also observed that much of the work currently taking place to address questions of people’s engagement with media, especially new media, is framed not in terms of audiences but rather in terms of literacies. This reflects the involvement of researchers from disciplines outside that of media and communications – including education, information science, sociology and literature, reflecting in turn the wider significance of people’s engagement with media – extending beyond the private domain of leisure to encompass learning, work, community and civic participation. Work on literacy, in short, takes place on a far larger and more contested canvass than did that of audiences, and it has a rather uneasy and only contingent relation with the specialist field of media literacy.

On the one hand, there are many parallels between the critical analysis of literacy and of audiences, as I have traced. Both bodies of work concern the interface between the interpretative activities and resources of ordinary people and the powerful institutions, texts and technologies that they engage with. Both are critical in that they identify forms of stratification and exclusion, they recognise and valorise the micro-tactics of marginalised audiences or the digitally excluded, and they resist explaining the undoubted limitations of these everyday tactics in terms of the limited competence of the public – as mindless couch potatoes, or as digitally illiterate.

The notion of literacy offers some advantages over that of audiences. There is a long and proud history of theorising emancipatory knowledge in terms of the democratisation of literacy, paralleling the history of communication technologies. Thus it is easier to discuss the educational, civic or creative potential of digital literacies than it is of critical audiences, even though similar ambitions may be at stake. On the other hand, and precisely because of its potency, literacy is also the focus of considerable scrutiny, increasingly central to deregulatory policies in the media and communications sector and, in consequence, strongly advocated in highly normative terms by the institutions of governance - school, workplace, family. Here, especially, the academy struggles to retain some control of the agenda into which its work is appropriated. I do not, therefore, conclude with any answers except to reiterate the core principles of critical analysis, which are to explicate the assumptions on which our work is conducted, scrutinise sceptically the manner in which our work is used, and always ask whose interests are served by the knowledge we produce.

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¹ As noted in the Dutch case, “if a service could properly be left to personal responsibility, then it would be excluded from the package” (*The Guardian*, 9 November 2004, Society Section, p. 7).