



[Sonia Livingstone](#)

Television and the active audience

Original citation:

Livingstone, Sonia (2000) *Television and the active audience*. In: *Formations: 21st century media studies*. Manchester University Press, Manchester, UK, pp. 175-195.

Copyright © 2000 Manchester University Press

This version available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/1004>

Available online: December 2007

LSE has developed LSE Research Online so that users may access research output of the School. Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may download and/or print one copy of any article(s) in LSE Research Online to facilitate their private study or for non-commercial research. You may not engage in further distribution of the material or use it for any profit-making activities or any commercial gain. You may freely distribute the URL (<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk>) of the LSE Research Online website.

This document is the author's final manuscript version of the chapter. Some differences between this version and the publisher's version remain. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk>

Contact LSE Research Online at: Library.Researchonline@lse.ac.uk

Chapter for

Formations: A 21st Century Media Studies Textbook (2000)

**editor: Dan Fleming,
Manchester University Press**

**Sonia Livingstone
Media@lse
London School of Economics and Political Science**

Contact details:

Department of Social Psychology, LSE,
Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE
Tel: (+44) 171 955 7710
Fax: (+44) 171 955 7565
Email: s.livingtone@lse.ac.uk

The active audience

It is something of a cliché in social science research to imagine a Martian arriving on Earth and being bewildered by what it sees. Yet as an exercise, it de-familiarises the familiar, allowing us to understand reality as a social construction and so to recognise the 'work' which goes into making sense of things which otherwise appear obvious to us. Television is a prime example of the obvious, in this sense: for regular viewers, a mere glance at the box in the corner reveals the latest development in the narrative, whether a narrative in the news or in our favourite soap opera. The meanings appear given, unavoidable, they exist 'in' the programmes and leap out at us when we watch. Taking in these meanings seems a routine and effortless process for most people. Kubey and Czikszenmihalyi's research on the television audience (1990) confirms our common-sense view that television viewing is a mindless and relaxing experience, for although television in its early years was startling and new, it has rapidly become 'moving wallpaper' in most homes. This common-sense view of television as moving wallpaper and of viewers as mindless absorbers of images fits with a longstanding trend in mass communication theory. Whether influenced by sociological theories of ideology and hegemony or by social psychological theories of media effects and attitude or behaviour change, many media researchers have regarded the audience as homogenous, vulnerable, and easily manipulated in the face of a powerful and all-pervasive mass media.

Yet, certain traditions of mass communications, both old and new (Curran, 1990), contradict this view and argue instead for active, resourceful and motivated audiences. Children are often in the position of the Martian, and work on children's understanding of television in particular has served to counter the notion of television viewing as an effortless experience. Many of young children's experiences of television show vividly the kinds of work that experienced viewers do in making sense of television. Greenfield (1984) reports her three-year old son's confusion when his mother, while appearing on television, failed to wave back at her son at home. Dorr (1986) describes how children can't understand how the Six Million Dollar man ever catches anybody, for he is always shown in slow motion at the point of capture. She also notes how five year olds regard advertisements as helpful displays of available products, with no idea that they are also persuasive, designed to sell to children. As Dorr (1986) and Hodge and Tripp (1986) reveal, even when children begin to understand the conventions of television -- the use of televisual codes such as ellipsis, action replay, or special effects -- they remain confused for some time. Dorr describes a seven-year old who, knowing that bullets in an action-adventure drama are fake, nonetheless remained anxious about the stray real bullet which may have been included by mistake. Christensen (1986) shows that even when children have figured out the relations between characters, actions, motives and consequences, they still find it hard even by the age of twelve to abstract the intended moral message in 'pro-social' children's drama.

None of this is to disparage children: as new members of society, they must learn the codes and conventions of all aspects of their culture, including television, if they are to become part of the culture, and they are inventive, sophisticated, and motivated in doing

this. However, in so doing, children's efforts to make sense of television point up the kinds of work which adults also do when viewing television. This invites a more general critique of the notion of viewing as mindless and passive, and of the many metaphors used to describe viewers in both common-sense and academic discourses (the passive absorption of messages, the viewer as a *tabula rasa*, the media as a hypodermic needle, etc.). To point to viewers' work specifically (Katz, 1996) is to identify a set of cognitive or interpretative processes, but is not necessarily to presume a conscious sense of effort or a straining after meaning. The ease with which viewers routinely make sense of television is evidence of the routine familiarity of these interpretative processes rather than evidence that such processes are unnecessary. Most important, and often surprising to viewers and researchers, is the fact that even the routine ease with which we generally make sense of television does not necessarily imply that everyone makes sense of television in the same way. Indeed, it is divergences in interpretation which often make apparent the operation of interpretative processes in the first place. And the nature of these divergences raises the question of why different people, or the same people under different circumstances, make sense of television in different ways.

Much contemporary audience research argues against the common-sense assumption that the meanings of television are obvious and require no interpretation to receive them. It points to the effort and confusions of children (and Martians) in making sense of television as a way of de-familiarising the familiar and pointing up the problematic of viewers' work as a significant area for research. This fits with another widespread discourse of television viewing, one particularly developed by uses and gratifications researchers, namely that of motivated and selective viewers making their own decisions about what to view and what to think about what they see (Blumler & Katz, 1974). They were concerned about the assumption of passive audiences and powerful media, an assumption which they felt represented a patronizing and elitist approach to audiences. This led uses and gratifications researchers to take a more inductive approach to the audience, asking diverse audiences of diverse programmes about why they watched them and what they got out of them (Rosengren, et al., 1985). The answers included media uses of entertainment, relaxation and escapism, but in almost equal measure, they also included media uses reflecting an active and motivated involvement in television. People are emotionally engaged by television; they talk of television meeting personal identity needs such as the legitimation of their values or gaining insight into themselves; they feel television keeps them connected to the rest of the world through a shared imagined community, through knowing what is happening in other places and through having common topics to discuss with others in their everyday lives. They even enjoy being critical of television, working out the production processes behind the programmes, speculating about the real lives of the actors, laughing at the conventions, and decoding complex advertisements designed to tease them (Liebes & Katz, 1995). If we understand the viewing experience in this way, then the very effort after meaning may be seen to be pleasurable. While the media transmit a blur of colours and sounds, the fact that they are seen by viewers to provide a resource for the

satisfaction of needs concerning identity, relationships and social connectedness makes clear the interpretative work which viewers must be doing.

We have, then, at least three arguments for the active engagement of audiences with the mass media. First, audiences must interpret what they see even to construct the message as meaningful and orderly, however routine this interpretation may be. Second, audiences diverge in their interpretations, generating different understandings from the same text. Third, the experience of viewing stands at the interface between the media (and their interpretations) and the rest of viewers' lives, with all the concerns, experiences and knowledge which this involves. Over the past twenty years or so, audience research has been a site of debate over these issues, in an attempt to fill out the now commonplace though still contested notion of 'the active audience'. Some of this work, from a more 'administrative tradition' (Lazarsfeld, 1941), draws directly on uses and gratifications theory (Levy & Windahl, 1985; Liebes & Katz, 1995), while those from a more 'critical' position define themselves against this work, emphasising the social and material contexts of both production and reception (Morley, 1992). Contentious issues include the following: In principle, is the media text open to multiple interpretations or is it rather an empirical observation that multiple interpretations arise from viewing? Should the experience of viewing be located primarily within a psychological or a socio-demographic context, by identifying motivations and interests, or cultural resources and material conditions as the factors which shape patterns of exposure and interpretation? How far do the media restrict or direct the interpretations that arise on viewing, so that particular meanings, rather than any and every meaning may result from viewing (Livingstone, 1998)?

This last issue brings us back to the question of the effects of viewing on the audience, which is probably the most central and most contentious question in media research (Livingstone, 1996). We are beginning to work out the ways in which effects do not simply result from the qualities of media texts but rather they depend both on selectivity in exposure and on interpretation or the construction of meanings. For both these processes, research shows that viewers draw on the diverse resources in their lives. Katz proposed some time ago 'that individuals seek information that will support their beliefs and practices and avoid information that challenges them' (Katz, 1968, p.795), thereby arguing for cognitive defences against the power of the media. More positively, he suggests that viewers 'impress the media into the service of individual needs and values' (Katz, 1979, p.75). Yet insufficient research exists which effectively investigates the linked processes of exposure, interpretation and effects. However, we know, for example, that media effects appear to differ depending on viewers' judgements of the realism of a programme (Dorr, 1986; Himmelweit, et al., 1958), on the closeness or similarity of that viewed to ones' own life (Collins & Wellman, 1982; Ettema, et al., 1983), on the strength of one's prior assumptions regarding the subject matter of a programme (Drabman, et al., 1981; Pingree, 1978), and on whether one has comprehended the relationship between motive, action and consequences in the programme (Dorr, 1986).

The emergence of audience reception analysis

Why did audience reception become such a focus for media research during the 1980s and 90s? Fifteen years ago, Hall identified the growth of empirical reception research as "a new and exciting phase in so-called audience research" (Hall, 1980, p.131) which emphasised the role of active viewers in a dynamic process of negotiating the meanings of television. For Blumler, Katz and Gurevitch (1985), this new focus offered a route 'to build the bridge we have been hoping might arise between gratifications studies and cultural studies' (Katz, 1979, p.75). One can identify several strands of thought which led to this particular convergence of diverse researchers on the same project at the same time. One strand was the growing recognition that critical mass communications research, with its focus on the ideological power and institutional production of texts, has tended to ignore, presume, or underestimate the interpretative activity of the audience (Fejes, 1984). Meanwhile, traditional audience research - whether uses and gratifications or effects research - suffered from an impoverished conception of both the (almost disappearing) television text (Blumler, et al., 1985) and the cultural contexts of viewing (Morley, 1986).

Another strand was the development of reception theory or reader-response theory within literary criticism as a less elitist, more interactionist means of analysing high culture, at least by comparison with traditional structural approaches (Holub, 1984; Suleiman & Crosman, 1980). The emphasis shifted from an analysis of the meanings 'in' the text, central to the text-based and content-analytic approaches to television programmes, to an analysis of the process of reading a text, where the meanings which are activated on reading depend on the interaction between text and reader. One reception theorist challenged prior assumptions of both texts and readers, arguing that:

"The work itself cannot be identical with the text or with its actualization but must be situated somewhere between the two... As the reader passes through the various perspectives offered by the text, and relates the different views and patterns to one another, he sets the work in motion, and so sets himself in motion too" (Iser, 1980, p.106).

In Britain, many cultural studies researchers were more strongly influenced by Hall's encoding/decoding model (Hall, 1980) which proposed that "the degrees of 'understanding' and 'misunderstanding' in the communicative exchange - depend on the degrees of symmetry/asymmetry ... between the positions of the 'personifications', encoder-producer and decoder/receiver" (p.131). The differences between encoding and decoding, and the location of these differences in the cultural and material contexts of encoding and decoding, were key theoretical moves. Hall's argument was close to that of the reception theorists when they argued that an implied or model reader is encoded into the text, specifying the "horizon of expectations" (Jauss, 1982) or the "textual competencies" (Eco, 1979) required to decode the text. Similarly, both Hall and the reception theorists also stressed that the particular circumstances in which the text is interpreted may or may not actually meet this specification of the ideal reader. The advantage of the more literary approaches over the encoding/decoding model lies in the closer specification of the relation between texts and readers which details the nature of

the codes and the nature of textual and extra-textual resources presumed by texts and available to audiences.

Eco's (1979) concept of the 'role of the reader' focused analysis at the point of interpretation, the interface between text and reader (or programme and viewer):

"The existence of various codes and subcodes, the variety of sociocultural circumstances in which a message is emitted (where the codes of the addressee can be different from those of the sender) and the rate of initiative displayed by the addressee in making presuppositions and abductions--all result in making a message...an empty form to which various possible senses can be attributed" (p.5)

His detailed outline of the kinds of codes, presuppositions, forms of knowledge and frames of interpretation in *The Role of the Reader* allows us to emphasise the dialectic between text and reader:

"A well-organised text on the one hand presupposes a model of competence coming, so to speak, from outside the text, but on the other hand works to build up, by merely textual means, such a competence" (p.8)

The notion of the role of the reader has provided a single concept through which we can investigate the textual strategies which construct the 'model reader' as well as the interpretative strategies which actual audiences use in particular, everyday contexts (Livingstone, 1998).

The investigation of audience reception rapidly became an empirical rather than a purely theoretical project. In so doing, it moved from careful consideration of particular reception theories such as those of Iser, Eco or Hall to a rather loose grounding in the blanket notion of 'reception theory' or 'audience reception analysis'. Having argued that texts are dynamic, that meanings are context-dependent, and that readings may be divergent, it became obvious that researchers must investigate the activities of actual audiences in order to know how they interpret programmes in everyday contexts. Despite the many methodological problems which arose from this shift to empirical reception research (Hoijer, 1990; Morley, 1981), this project quickly justified itself through the joint discoveries that firstly, audiences often differed from researchers in their understanding of the media text, and secondly that audiences were themselves heterogenous. Both discoveries undermined the possibility of arguing for a direct link between the meanings supposedly inherent in the text and the consequent effects of those meanings on the audience. As a result, attention was redirected to studying the interpretative contexts which framed and informed viewers' understandings of television.

Examples of resourceful readers

Three widely cited examples of empirical reception research illustrate the use of cultural, class and gender codes as resources in the interpretation of different genres of popular culture.

In the *Export of Meaning* project, Liebes and Katz (1995) examined processes of and resistance to so-called Americanisation or cultural imperialism by exploring the reception of *Dallas* by diverse cultural groups. They analysed focus group discussions held during and after viewing an episode of *Dallas* in people's homes. The researchers' analysis of the text had suggested that *Dallas* concerned primordial cultural themes such as lineage, inheritance, sibling rivalry, property, sex and marriage. Yet the empirical audience study found that viewers of different social and cultural backgrounds generated very different interpretations of the same episode. Thus, Russian Jews made ideological readings centred on the moral and political themes underlying the narratives, Americans focused on the personalities and motivations of the characters to make their readings coherent, and Moroccan Arabs emphasised event sequencing and narrative continuity. Each group's reading was clearly constrained by the text and yet the interaction between diverse cultural resources and at least some degree of textual openness resulted in divergent readings.

Morley's study (1980; 1981; 1992) of audience readings or decodings of the current affairs magazine, *Nationwide*, showed how audiences diverged as a function of their socio-economic or labour position. Predictably, given that Morley was exploring understandings of the news, audiences' interpretations were politically framed. Bank managers and schoolboys were found to make the most normative readings, consistent with the ideologically dominant assumptions which structured the programme. Trainee teachers and trade union officials made politically inconsistent, ambivalent or negotiated readings. Other groups, for example shop stewards, took a clearly oppositional position, using the resources of the text to construct a critical reading quite unintended by the text. A few viewers were wholly alienated from the text as it did not afford them a reading congruent with their own cultural position (for example, black further education students; in the *Export of Meaning* project, it was Japanese viewers who occupied this position). This division of audience reception into dominant, negotiated and oppositional positions (Hall, 1980), has influenced much subsequent research.

Radway (1985) revealed the contrast between the readings of popular romance novels made by ordinary women readers and those of literary critics. She argued that "different readers read differently because they belong to what are known as various interpretive communities, each of which acts upon print differently and for different purposes" (Radway, 1985, p.341). In the case of Harlequin romances, women readers were found to emphasise the literal meaning and the factual nature of language in preference to narrative consistency (preferred by the critics), when the two conflicted. For example, the heroine in these books is typically described initially as strong and independent and yet ultimately she appears to submit to her hero's demands. Feminist critics have generally emphasised the significance of the latter capitulation, yet Radway found the ordinary women readers to emphasise the former, thereby resisting the normative patriarchal message, and generating their own meanings. On this account, the heroine is seen subtly to win over her hero, unbeknownst to him, thus revealing her true strength, which had often been stated quite literally at the outset of the novel.

Filling out the text-reader metaphor

Many studies have since supported the notion of ideologically resistant readings. These include studies which focus on gender (Brown, 1990; Seiter, et al., 1989; van Zoonen, 1994), while other studies have investigated the influence on reception of social class or labour market position (Kitzinger, 1993; Press, 1991). Each has been concerned with the ways in which texts attempt to position readers as particular kinds of subject through specific modes of address. Viewers have been found to accept or neglect such textual invitations in the construction of their subject position. Sometimes we can see that they read against the grain by exploiting the inevitable degree of openness in the text, they make aberrant readings, and play with textual conventions, thereby jointly constructing different meanings on different occasions (Buckingham, 1987; Lewis, 1987; Livingstone and Lunt, 1994; Seiter, et al., 1989).

From the point of view of audience studies, in order to elaborate this text-reader metaphor, we need a theory of the viewer's interpretative resources - a theory of what viewers bring to the moment of reception from their past and present life circumstances. We also need a theory of the text that provides a space for the deployment of these resources. One useful concept is that of the schema -- a dynamic, representational structure which operates by balancing processes of assimilation and accommodation in integrating old with new experiences (Bartlett, 1932; Piaget, 1968). For reception theorists, the frameworks which structure a media text are best understood as schematic rather than complete, with the role of the reader being to fill out this schema. To fill out the schema in unexpected ways, without breaking the boundaries of the schema is to read against the grain; going further and breaking these boundaries is to make an aberrant or wrong reading. Generally, television programmes are designed with sufficient knowledge of the audience's interests so that audiences may fill out rather than conflict with the encoded textual schema. Thus the 'texts of experience' contribute to interpretation in a 'slot-filling' capacity, where the location and nature of the gaps to be filled are specified by the 'skeletal' structure of the text (Iser, 1980) rather than by the reader's concerns. For example, when we read a book, we fill out our image of the main characters by drawing on our own social knowledge and imagination as readers. Then, when we see the film of the book, our images are often contradicted and our interpretative activities - what we have added to the text - become visible to us. Yet the overall meaning of the book or film is rarely undermined in this way although the pleasure - that of actively generating images meaningful to ourselves - may be reduced.

Such an approach to texts and readers is illuminating, and allows us to keep a handle on the often 'disappearing message'. Yet the reader or viewer is fragmented by such analysis, for the invitations to fill out the text are under the control of the text not the reader, and textual coherence is prioritised over the reader's experience. Precisely in order to prevent such a fragmentation, the psychology of textual interpretation reverses this bias (Mandler, 1984; van Dijk, 1987). Here, the reader's resources are themselves conceived in terms of schemas which provide integrative, knowledge-based frameworks for active interpretation and which leave gaps or slots to be filled according to the

particularities of the text. For example, as viewers we share a cultural repertoire that includes the romance as a narrative form. A particular television drama merely fills out the specific details - who is the hero, what does the heroine do, what kinds of problems beset them - which particularise the programme as one instance of our general schema. For this approach, an analysis of the reader's socio-cognitive resources is needed to understand both how viewers fill out textual schemas and how they impose their own schemas on the viewing experience (Livingstone, 1998).

Research on everyday "lay theories" illuminates the ways in which viewers make sense of television characters and narratives. Such social knowledge is dynamic and integrative, directing and informing interpretations of television, rather than a static and disjointed set of facts which television may simply replace with its own given set of meanings. For example, research on social cognition reveals people's biases towards seeking confirmatory rather than falsifying evidence to fit their preconceptions) as well as their 'scripted' knowledge of standard event sequences (e.g. Reeves, et al., 1982). It also shows how they draw on cognitive story grammars to interpret narrative (van Dijk, 1987), on attributional schemas to understand causality (Kelley, 1972), and how they use a variety of interpretative heuristics to determine the relevance and typicality of the events portrayed (Kahneman, et al., 1982). As social knowledge is shared within, indeed is constituted by the activities of, groups or cultures, theorising the role of the viewer in this way avoids the psychological reductionism which implies that audience readings are entirely unpredictable or idiosyncratic. Consequently, we can use social cognition to explain how and why viewers who differ in gender, class or culture actually achieve their divergent readings, for these differences in social context are manifested in the interpretative resources of the viewers.

Comprehension and interpretation of television programmes

Having discussed the resources available to viewers, let us now consider how these are used. Two broad approaches to the sense-making process exist in the research literature which, while often presented as oppositional, could instead be integrated with each other. In Tables 1 and 2, I present two examples of how different approaches can be combined to offer a more coherent and comprehensive approach to audience reception. The horizontal dimension of each table divides textual codes (put simply, what programmes 'expect' or 'invite' from audiences) from extratextual codes (in effect, what audiences 'bring' to the text from the context of their daily lives). This is relatively straightforward, and emphasises that viewers draw upon both kinds of codes, as indeed programmes makers presume they will (Livingstone, 1998). The effect of integrating theory across this dimension is to facilitate connections between theories of media literacy -- of how viewers build up an understanding of specifically tele-visual conventions (Anderson, 1983), with theories of everyday understanding -- in which everyday social knowledge is used to decode mass as well as interpersonal communication. This would allow us to begin to explore the relations, overlaps and

contradictions between these two categories of knowledge, as well as the overlapping and different contextual determinants of each.

The vertical dimension of the two tables facilitates the integration of two traditionally opposed approaches to sense-making, one focusing on comprehension and the other on interpretation. To put it another way, one is concerned with how viewers understand the denotational level of the text while the other is concerned with the connotational level of the text. Hall (1980, p.133) defines these two levels of analysis by distinguishing "those aspects of a sign which appear to be taken, in any language community at any point in time, as its 'literal' meaning (denotation) from the more associative meanings for the sign which it is possible to generate (connotation)". By stressing that both denotation and connotation are coded rather than natural, Hall is inviting the study of audience reception for both levels, for they represent "the different levels at which ideologies and discourses intersect" (p.133). Yet most work following the encoding/decoding model investigates audience reception of connotative meanings as part of the broader project of studying the ritual or symbolic functions of cultural communication. Thus it regards studying the decoding of denotation as a reversion to the much criticised and supposedly over-simplistic transmission model of communication (Carey, 1989). Instead, I would suggest - as indeed Carey does when proposing his very useful distinction between these two models of communication - that both transmission of meanings and the construction of shared communities are implicated in the reception of television programmes.

If both are involved in reception, why is it useful to distinguish comprehension from interpretation (Livingstone, 1998)? 'Comprehension' concerns whether viewers receive specific programme information or whether specific textual biases are mirrored by the viewers. Thus, cognitive psychologists ask whether children can decode a narrative to discover 'who done it' or whether they can tell the 'baddies' from the 'goodies' (e.g. Collins, 1983; Reeves & Garramone, 1982). Using similar assumptions, researchers who check the psychological reality of content analyses ask whether particular contents are accurately received by viewers. It should be clear that these questions are rather different from those focussed on 'interpretation' which typify audience reception studies (including those referred to earlier in this chapter). For in these studies, 'interpretation' rather concerns evaluation, contextualisation, connotation and the many divergences in opinion or perspective that also contribute to the process of 'making sense of television'. The underlying assumption behind studies of comprehension draw rather problematically on information-processing theory, conceiving of meaning as unitary and as given by the text, thus only giving viewers the power to agree or disagree with this meaning. However, advances in both semiotic and audience theories require that this match/mismatch conception of the role of the viewer be developed so as to permit a view of the text as polysemic and open and a view of audiences as actively constructive in their interpretations.

In short, as proposed schematically in Tables 1 and 2, studying processes of comprehension or interpretation involves focusing on two different facets of the same phenomenon, that of audience reception. If we want to know how well people remember

the news, what they gain from a public information campaign, or whether they learn from election broadcasts, a focus on comprehension is appropriate. But if we want to know what meanings are actually generated through media exposure and what resources direct the construction of those meanings, rather than whether certain *a priori* meanings are successfully transmitted or not, then we should analyse the viewers in context and focus on the connotational level of the text for which it is more likely that "situational ideologies alter and transform signification" (Hall, 1980, p.133). Whether one studies comprehension (of denotation) or interpretation (of connotation) should depend less on whether one adheres in principle to a transmission or a ritual model of communication than on which aspects of the text or audience are relevant to one's research questions.

Consider the example in Table 1. Palmer's study of 'the lively audience' shows how the symbolic and identity relations between children and television change as children develop intellectually: "with the development of an understanding of narratives, of story and character, older children make more complex demands on their favourite TV shows" (p.121). Thus after the age of 8 or 9, children begin to prefer more realistic and more complex programmes instead of the cartoons or toy animal shows they liked earlier. The link between comprehension and interpretation is twofold. First, comprehension of the basic narrative is a prerequisite for the more differentiated or motivated modes of interpretation which emerge when children begin to make more subtle judgements about genre, about the realism of what is portrayed and about the relation between the drama and their own lives. Second, through the interpretation of these more subtle, connotative aspects of programmes, older children can incorporate television into their relations with friends and family. By this, I mean the various activities of fitting television's meanings and images to their symbolic needs, using what they see not merely to copy televised events or display shared media experiences, but also to define their particular identities, to negotiate friendships through role play, or to work out the rules for social interaction in the playground (Livingstone and Bovill, 1999). Consequently, it would be inappropriate to explore children's interpretations and incorporation of television into their daily lives without first knowing how they comprehend the connections, sequencing and conclusions of the narratives, how they determine the modality or realism of different genres, or what they know of the production and purpose of programmes. There are important differences of gender and social class here, and these contribute to the different interpretations or uses of television for children, but the differences among children of different ages, reflecting different phases of intellectual development, are the most striking, affecting children's basic comprehension of the narratives.

A parallel argument can be made for adults' comprehension of the news (Table 2). Levy and Robinson (1986) compared the features of better- and worse-comprehended stories, and found that stories are better comprehended depending on factors such as personalisation, use of a standard narrative structure, degree of human interest, and so forth. Findahl and Hoijer (1976) add that news which includes causal information in the story is better comprehended also (- stories often include who, what, where and when, but not why, information which is needed by viewers to integrate the other information). The importance of these textual features makes sense from the point of view of the

viewers' resources. Viewers apply story grammars used in interpersonal communication to mediated communication, and they connect everyday patterns of attribution of causality and responsibility to the comprehension of the news, while human interest stories would encourage them to use everyday social knowledge when 'slot-filling' in the news stories. However, as Gamson (1992) shows, there are different ways of providing this kind of information within the text. The news may offer different explanatory frames for the same narrative, casting an event into a frame which, for example, polarizes 'us' and 'them' or which characterises participants as 'feuding neighbours'. Different news events tend to be framed according to different but familiar cultural frames which then resonate with other domains of sociocultural knowledge or experience. The textual characteristics that enhance comprehension, one might argue, do so by directing viewers towards particular kinds of interpretation of the news, and these interpretations resonate with yet further cultural understandings, depending on the knowledge, experience and position of the viewer. Consequently, more than 'comprehending what happened yesterday' is at stake, raising questions of the political consciousness and identity of the citizen-viewer (Corner, 1991; Livingstone and Lunt, 1994).

Conclusions: next steps for audience reception research

Reviewing the past twenty years of research, it is apparent that the once-new idea of audience reception has become so taken for granted that studies of media forms or processes now frequently include a study of the audience. Moreover, audience research now tends to mean research on reception not, as previously, research on effects. However, the rapidity of these developments has meant that accumulating problems have not yet been adequately resolved (Livingstone, 1998). For example, the ways in which audience reception may mediate effects remains to be explored. Indeed, as long as the mediated transmission of meanings is neglected in favour of the ritual significance of the media, the problem of effects will remain (although the argument for resistant readings made of normative texts is often implicitly an argument about media effects). It is also problematic that the recent 'ethnographic turn' (Lull, 1990; Seiter, et al., 1989), which has successfully contextualised viewing within the practices of everyday life, seems at times to lose sight of the direct interaction between actual programmes and audiences and, hence, of their more indirect consequences in everyday life.

In conclusion, I have argued that viewing must be understood in terms of the diversity of specific daily practices of media involvement which themselves gain significance through their specific socio-demographic and sub-cultural contexts. Yet by emphasising the relation between programme interpretation and local cultural contexts, media theory begins to lose itself and the specificity of its research agenda in the rapidly expanding domain of interdisciplinary cultural theory. Rather than being distracted by the truth that everything is connected, as part of the 'context', we should recall that it may be useful to maintain analytic distinctions between different approaches. For example, at the level of theory, the many kinds of resource on which viewers may draw (social psychological, familial, material/domestic, gender, class, ethnicity, culture, etc.) can and

indeed should be integrated to illuminate television viewing. However, unless we are to be restricted to case studies, empirical investigation of such a multiplicity of factors must proceed through a range of separate studies whose conclusions then require integration with each other within a comparative framework.

Through meeting this challenge, certain future directions for research will become apparent. For example, is the blanket notion of reception theory sufficient or need we retain the specificity of different approaches to reception? Where are the gaps in the empirical research (for example, what about some studies of the male soap opera viewer, or female sports or news fans, surely necessary if we are to sustain and elaborate the argument for gendered readings of gendered genres)? Have certain rules of evidence (Katz, 1996) emerged to ground empirical research or is there still methodological dissent? And in relation to the resourceful reader in particular, in what ways do the different resources of the viewer combine or compete in practice? For this last question, we could begin by cataloguing the types of interpretative resources used in viewing, and then specifying the different processes by which these resources are deployed. This would then allow us to understand how the text - here, the television programme - invites, directs, or constrains the resourceful reader in both comprehension and interpretation and how these processes are incorporated into the flow of everyday life.

Table 1: Resources used in comprehending and interpreting television: Examples from children's understanding of drama

<p>\ Interpretative \ resources: \ Focus on \ processes of: \</p>	<p>Predominant use of textual codes</p>	<p>Predominant use of extra-textual codes</p>
<p>Denotation in text, comprehension in viewer</p>	<p>Collins (1978) showed that children comprehended narratives better if textual cues to narrative structure were provided.</p>	<p>Collins (1982) showed that children comprehended the narrative better if the social background of the characters matched their own.</p>
<p>Connotation in text, interpretation in viewer</p>	<p>Buckingham (1987) showed that children used their knowledge of the genre and the history of the programme to interpret the significance of soap opera happenings.</p>	<p>Palmer (1986) showed how children integrated their response to television drama with play experiences with friends and siblings.</p>

Table 2: Resources used in comprehending and interpreting television: Examples from adults' understanding of the news

<p>\ Interpretative \ resources: \ Focus on \ processes of: \</p>	<p>Predominant use of textual codes</p>	<p>Predominant use of extra-textual codes</p>
<p>Denotation in text, comprehension in viewer</p>	<p>Findahl and Hoijer (1976) showed that news comprehension is improved by textual provision of explanation or background.</p>	<p>Robinson and Levy (1986) showed that prior information (measured by educational level) aids comprehension of the news.</p>
<p>Connotation in text, interpretation in viewer</p>	<p>Jensen (1986) and Gamson (1992) showed how different interpretative frames or 'super-themes' cued by the text result in divergent understandings of the same news event.</p>	<p>Liebes (1992) shows how the same news event is differently interpreted in families of differing political persuasion.</p>

References

Anderson, J. A. (1983). Television literacy and the critical viewer. In J. Bryant & D. R. Anderson (Eds.), *Children's understanding of television* New York: Academic Press.

Ang, I. (1985). *Watching DALLAS: Soap opera and the melodramatic imagination*. New York: Methuen.

Bartlett, F. C. (1932). *Remembering: A study in experimental and social psychology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Blumler, J. G., Gurevitch, M., & Katz, E. (1985). REACHING OUT: A future for gratifications research. In K. E. Rosengren, L. A. Wenner, & P. Palmgreen (Eds.), *Media gratifications research: Current perspectives* Beverly Hills, Cal.: Sage.

Blumler, J. G., & Katz, E. (Ed.). (1974). *The Uses of Mass Communications: Current Perspectives on Gratification Research*. Beverly Hills, Cal.: Sage.

Brown, M. E. (Ed.). (1990). *Television and women's culture: the politics of the popular*. London: Sage.

Buckingham, D. (1987). *Public secrets: EastEnders and its audience*. London: British Film Institute.

Carey, J. W. (1989). *Communication as culture*. London: Routledge.

Christenson, P. G. (1986). Children's perceptions of moral themes in television drama. In M. L. McLaughlin (Eds.), *Communication Yearbook* (pp. 463-479). Beverly Hills, Cal.: Sage.

Collins, W. A. (1983). Interpretation and inference in children's television viewing. In J. Bryant & D. A. Anderson (Eds.), *Children's understanding of television: research on attention and comprehension* New York: Academic Press.

Collins, W. A., & Wellman, H. M. (1982). Social scripts and developmental patterns in comprehension of televised narratives. *Communication Research*, *9*(3), 380-398.

Collins, W. A., Wellman, H. M., Keniston, A. H., & Westby, S. D. (1978). Age-related aspects of comprehension and inference from a televised dramatic narrative. *Child Development*, *49*, 389-399.

- Corner, J. (1991). Meaning, genre and context: the problematics of 'public knowledge' in the new audience studies. In J. Curran & M. Gurevitch (Eds.), *Mass Media and Society* London: Methuen.
- Curran, J. (1990). The new revisionism in mass communication research. *European Journal of Communication*, 5(2-3), 135-164.
- Dorr, A. (1986). *Television and children: A special medium for a special audience*. Beverley Hills, Cal.: Sage.
- Drabman, R. S., Robertson, S. J., Patterson, J. N., Jarvie, G. J., Hammer, D., & Cordua, G. (1981). Children's perception of media-portrayed sex roles. *Sex Roles*, 7, 379-389.
- Eco, U. (1979). Introduction: The role of the reader. In *The role of the reader: Explorations in the semiotics of texts*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Ettema, J. S., Brown, J. W., & Luepker, R. V. (1983). Knowledge gap effects in a health information campaign. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 47, 516-527.
- Fejes, F. (1984). Critical mass communications research and media effects: The problem of the disappearing audience. *Media, Culture and Society*, 6(3), 219-232.
- Findahl, O., & Hvijs, B. (1976). *Fragments of reality: an experiment with news and TV - visuals*. Stockholm: Swedish Broadcasting Corporation.
- Fiske, J. (1989). Moments of television: neither the text nor the audience. In Seiter, E. et al. (1989) *Remote control: television audiences and cultural power*. London: Routledge.
- Fiske, S. T., & Taylor, S. E. (1984). *Social cognition*. New York: Random House.
- Gamson, W. A. (1992). *Talking politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Graber, D. A. (1988). *Processing the news: How people tame the information tide* (2nd ed.). New York: Longman.
- Greenfield, P. M. (1984). *Mind and media*. Harvard University Press
- Hall, S. (1980). Encoding/Decoding. In S. Hall, D. Hobson, A. Lowe, & P. Willis (Eds.), *Culture, Media, Language*. London: Hutchinson.
- Hodge, R., & Tripp, D. (1986). *Children and television: A semiotic approach*. Cambridge: Polity.

- Holub, R. C. (1984). *Reception theory: A critical introduction*. London: Methuen.
- Himmelweit, H. T., Oppenheim, A. N., & Vince, P. (1958). *Television and the child: An empirical study of the effect of television on the young*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Hoijer, B. (1990). Studying viewers' reception of television programmes: theoretical and methodological considerations. *European Journal of Communication*, *5*(1), 29-56.
- Iser, W. (1980). Interaction between text and reader. In S. R. Suleiman & I. Crosman (Eds.), *The reader in the text: essays on audience and interpretation* Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Jauss, H. R. (1982). *Towards an aesthetic of reception*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Jensen, K. B. (1986). *Making sense of the news: towards a theory and an empirical model of reception for the study of mass communication*. Aarhus C, Denmark: Aarhus University Press.
- Kahneman, D., Slovic, P., & Tversky, A. (Ed.). (1982). *Judgment under uncertainty: Heuristics and biases*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Katz, E. (1996). Viewers work. In J. Hay, L. Grossberg, & E. Wartella (Eds.), *The audience and its landscape*. Boulder: Westview.
- Katz, E. (1979). The uses of Becker, Blumler and Swanson. *Communication Research*, *6*(1), 74-83.
- Katz, E. (1968). On reopening the question of selectivity in exposure to mass communications. In R. P. Abelson & e. al. (Eds.), *Theories of cognitive consistency: A sourcebook* Chicago: Rand McNally and Co.
- Kelley, H. H. (1972). Attribution: Perceiving the causes of behaviour. In E. E. Jones, D. E. Kanouse, H. H. Kelley, R. E. Nisbett, S. Valins, & B. Weiner (Eds.), *Attribution in social interaction* Morristown, N. J.: General Learning Press.
- Kitzinger, J. (1993). Understanding AIDS: researching audience perceptions of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome. In J. (. U. M. G. Eldridge (Eds.), *Getting the message: news, truth and power* London: Routledge.
- Kubey, R., & Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990). *Television and the quality of life: How viewing shapes everyday experience*. Hillsdale, N. J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Lazarsfeld, P. F. (1941). Remarks on administrative and critical communications research. *Studies in Philosophy and Science*, 9, 3-16.

Levy, M. R., & Windahl, S. (1985). The concept of audience activity. In K. E. Rosengren, L. A. Wenner, & P. Palmgreen (Eds.), *Media gratifications research* Beverly Hills, Cal.: Sage.

Lewis, J. (1987). The framework of political television. In J. Hawthorn (Eds.), *Propaganda, persuasion and polemic* London: Edward Arnold.

Liebes, T. (1992). Decoding tv news: the political discourse of Israeli hawks and doves. *Theory and Society*, 21, 357-381.

Liebes, T., & Katz, E. (1990). *The export of meaning*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Liebes, T., & Katz, E. (1986). Patterns of involvement in television fiction: A comparative analysis. In *European Journal of Communication*, (pp. 151-172).

Livingstone, S. (1996). On the continuing problems of media effects research. In J. Curran and M. Gurevitch (Eds.), *Mass Media and Society*. London: Edward Arnold. Second edition.

Livingstone, S. (1998). *Making sense of television: The psychology of audience interpretation*. 2nd Edition, London: Routledge.

Livingstone, S., and Lunt, P. (1994). *Talk on television: audience participation and public debate*. London: Routledge.

Livingstone, S., and Bovill, M. (1999). *Young people, new media*. Final Report of the project, 'Children, young people and the changing media environment'. London School of Economics.

Lull, J. (Ed.). (1988). *World families watch television*. Newbury Park, Cal.: Sage.

Mandler, J. M. (1984). *Stories, scripts, and scenes: Aspects of schema theory*. Hillsdale, N.J.: Erlbaum.

Moore, S. (1993). *Interpreting audiences: The ethnography of media consumption*. London: Sage.

Morley, D. (1992). *Television, audiences and cultural studies*. London: Routledge.

Morley, D. (1981). The Nationwide audience: A critical postscript. *Screen Education*, 39, 3-14.

Morley, D. (1980). *The Nationwide audience: Structure and decoding*. London: British Film Institute.

Palmer, P. (1986). *The lively audience: a study of children around the TV set*. London: Allen & Unwin.

Philo, G. (1993). Getting the message: audience research in the Glasgow University Media Group. In J. Eldridge (Ed.), *Getting the message: news, truth and power*. London: Routledge.

Piaget, J. (1968). *Structuralism*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Pingree, S. (1978). The effects of nonsexist television commercials and perceptions of reality on children's attitudes about women. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 2(3), 262-277.

Press, A. L. (1991). *Women watching television*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Radway, J. (1985). Interpretive communities and variable literacies: The functions of romance reading. In M. Gurevitch & M. R. Levy (Eds.), *Mass Communication Review Yearbook* Beverly Hills, Cal.: Sage.

Reeves, B., Chaffee, S. H., & Tims, A. (1982). Social cognition and mass communication research. In M. E. Roloff & C. R. Berger (Eds.), *Social cognition and communication* London: Sage.

Reeves, B., & Garramone, G. (1982). Children's person perception: The generalization from television people to real people. *Human Communication Research*, 8(4), 317-326.

Robinson, J. P., & Levy, M. R. (1986). Interpersonal communication and news comprehension. *Public opinion quarterly*, 50.

Rosengren, K. E., Wenner, L. A., & Palmgreen, P. (Ed.). (1985). *Media gratifications research: Current perspectives*. Beverly Hills, Cal.: Sage.

Seaman, W. R. (1992). Active audience theory: pointless populism. *Media, Culture and Society*, 14, 301-311.

- Seiter, E., Borchers, H., Kreutzner, G., & Warth, E.-M. (1989). *Remote control: television audiences and cultural power*. London: Routledge.
- Silj, A. (1988). *East of Dallas: The European challenge to American television*. London: British Film Institute.
- Silverstone, R. (1994). *Television and everyday life*. London: Routledge.
- Suleiman, S., & Crosman, I. (Ed.). (1980). *The reader in the text*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- van Dijk, T. A. (1987). *News as discourse*. Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- van Zoonen, L. (1994). *Feminist media studies*. London: Sage.
- Wren-Lewis, J. (1983). The encoding/decoding model: Criticisms and developments. *Media, Culture and Society*, 5, 179-197.