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Media audiences, interpreters, users

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Block 2, Open University Course ‘DA204: Using Media’

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Media Audiences, Interpreters, Users

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D2: Media Audiences, Interpreters and Users

1 Introduction: What is the audience and why is it important?

Throughout the world, though especially in industrialized countries, people routinely spend a huge amount of time with different forms of media, often more time than they spend at work or school or in face to face communication. Within a single generation, homes have become media-rich, with multiple televisions, radios, games machines, computers, music systems and telephones, these typically shifting from household possessions to personal possessions, accompanying us wherever we go. In our everyday engagement with friends and family, with the community, the political system, the nation and beyond, we draw upon, and we increasingly rely upon, a never-ending flood of images, ideas and information about worlds distant in space or time and about the world close to home.

Imagine our homes without screens, our daily routines without television, our work without the internet, our friendships without shared music interests, and it is obvious how much we are all part of media audiences. Yet the commonsense view of the audience is ambivalent. Although most people consider it desirable in practice to be part of the audience – believing that citizens ‘should’ watch the news, that it’s wrong to ‘deprive’ a child of television, that someone is ‘weird’ if they don’t follow the music scene, at the same time, people are reluctant to acknowledge the implications of this ‘media-dependency’ for domestic practices, social relationships, political participation, for their (our) very identity.

Illustration of a typical living room full of media/screens

Ever since the media first made ‘mass’ communication possible, a dominant strand of popular – and academic – thinking about audiences, the very idea of the audience even, has been pejorative. Audiences are seen as mindless, ignorant, indiscriminating, defenceless, naïve, and so as manipulated or exploited by the mass media. Although we, and our children, it may be proclaimed, are discerning, sensible, critical members of the audience – other people and, especially, other people’s children in the audience give cause for concern.

This chapter takes exactly this ambivalence about the audience as its starting point. It shows that throughout the history of the media – and the history of the audience – the idea of the audience has been far from taken for granted. Rather, it has been subject to the competing claims of (at least) two dominant discourses, one liberal, one critical.

- The liberal or pluralist discourse locates the audience within the development of Western industrialised society, arguing that the media must reach the citizens – in their role as audiences – if they are to gain the information, understanding and shared cultural values required to sustain the informed consent that underpins democratic governance. Yet within this democratic view of audiences lie also the seeds of doubt – what happens when audiences do not act in a selective or rational manner, or when the media don’t provide fair or balanced information?
- Such doubts form the starting point for a critical or radical discourse. This positions audiences as consumers rather than citizens, seeing them as the managed subject of powerful institutional interests, vulnerable to political

manipulation and commercial exploitation by the culture industries through subtle and pervasive strategies of mass communication. Yet here too there are signs of doubt – can the population be castigated so contemptuously for its apparently naïve, pleasure-seeking, herd-like behaviour, and is there no defence of the media?

This chapter cannot cover the range of research which has sought to understand the multifaceted nature of people's relationships with media. Instead, it addresses the following key themes:

- How public concerns about the media drive what gets asked about audiences
- A historical perspective on the debate over active and passive audiences
- The mixed fortunes of research on media effects
- The turn to asking how audiences make sense of television
- Current challenges and future questions

2 Moral panics, media effects and the audience research agenda

2.1 Popular anxieties about the media audience

There is a long history of social and political debate underlying ambivalence about the audience. This debate – between the liberal and critical discourses identified above - continually resurfaces when we ask, for example, are children the technical whiz kids of the cyber-future or the vulnerable innocents of an increasingly commercialised culture? Is being part of an audience one way of participating as a citizen in a shared community and/or is it just a way of indulging the escapist pleasures of a 'mere consumer'. Does the audience have the collective power to vote with their feet (or fingers on the off button) to ensure that broadcasters give them what they want? Or are they an economic commodity which broadcasters sell (via market researchers' ratings) to the advertising industry?

Illustration of newspaper front page panicking about effects

Not only are the questions about audiences wide-ranging but there are many policy makers, commercial organisations and academic disciplines that have a stake in debating the power and effects of the media. Consider the range of institutions concerned with audiences - from the politician's anxiety about ensuring an informed electorate to the education system's concern with literacy levels, from the advertising industry's relentless competition for market share to the labour market's demand for a hi-tech workforce. Add those who scapegoat the media - for their supposed moral impact on family life, on ethnic stereotyping or on crime statistics. And it should be clear why the notion of audiences is so hotly contested, and why the audience research agenda is driven by many interests.

Activity 1

Think about how the media represents audiences. What terms are popularly used to describe audiences? Are they positive or negative? Do they assume the audience to be homogenous or diverse? Are they describing people like you? What common anxieties are expressed in newspaper headlines, for example? What questions might these perceptions, or anxieties, lead policy makers and public to ask researchers?

Historians of the media have pointed out that, typically as each new medium is introduced, a surprisingly similar set of hopes and fears arise each time. At present, these 'moral panics' centre on the internet, with anxieties being expressed about violent, stereotyped, commercially exploitative or pornographic content and about the reinforcement of individualistic, lazy, prejudiced, uncritical or aggressive actions. Yet these same questions were asked about video games before the internet, about the introduction of television before that, and about radio, cinema and comics back through the decades.

Kirsten Drotner (1992) observed that as each new medium is introduced, we undergo a kind of 'historical amnesia' about previous panics, cheerfully incorporate into our daily lives the medium that preceded it. She argues further that each panic tends to follow a predictable path, starting with a 'pessimistic elitism' associated with calls for technocratic and legalistic measures such as censorship or legal age restrictions to minimise dangers and moving to an 'optimistic pluralism' associated with a tolerance of audience diversity along with moral education or media literacy teaching to optimise benefits.

This does not mean, of course, that the concerns expressed in moral panics are necessarily improper, though it does make them less 'new' than their proponents often suppose. But often they are misguided, particularly when they seek to blame the media for the wider social ills of society such as social unrest, crime, family breakdown or political apathy, thereby displacing attention from alternative or radical solutions. Moral panics attract an even more critical analysis when they mask intolerant or prejudiced assumptions about audiences 'other' than the right-thinking people making the complaints.

As Stan Cohen (1972) argued, public anxieties or moral panics may present themselves as positive and wholesome, what Geoffrey Pearson (1983) termed 'respectable fears', for example in the creation of the deviant and stigmatised image of 'youth' (and youth culture) in 1950s Britain or in the rhetoric of a golden age image of childhood innocence when attacking popular pleasures. When examined closely, these often reveal middle class concerns about the 'polluting' effect of working class practices (parents who can't control their children or who don't instil proper values, youth running amok in the streets, and so on, children not developing their imagination 'properly'). According to this analysis, moral attacks on the media rest on social inequalities and so should be deconstructed and resisted rather than taken as the starting point for research investigation.

2.2 Taking the long view: active and passive audiences in historical perspective

Illustration from Butsch – e.g, the music hall audience. Or Shakespeare's Globe – a rowdy audience or even the Roman forum

Most media research addresses the contemporary scene – today's media, today's audiences, today's concerns. Moreover, most research has been conducted during the twentieth century and most has concerned television. But, as historians of the media are keen to point out, the idea of the audience is much older than this. Throughout most of history, the idea of the audience has meant a face-to-face audience in the presence of a communicator or entertainer, whether at a political meeting, the theatre or a concert. Denis McQuail (1997: 3) suggests that the same features which defined the classical Greco-Roman audience still define audiences today. He identifies six:

- “Planning and *organization* of viewing and listening, as well as of the performances themselves
- ‘Events with a *public* and “popular” character
- ‘*Secular* (thus not religious) content of performance – for entertainment, education, and vicarious emotional experiences
- ‘*Voluntary*, individual acts of choice and attention
- ‘*Specialization* of roles of authors, performers, and spectators
- ‘Physical *locatedness* of performance and spectator experience

The innovation of the mass media, after all, was to eliminate the need for physical co-location, for mass communication is communication at a distance, institutionalising a crucial break between performer and spectator or, in today’s terms, producer and audience.

The history of the audience, therefore, is one of historical continuities as well as discontinuities. Although we tend to find the discontinuities more interesting (or worrying) – how broadcasting breaks with the age of print, how the internet affords unprecedented possibilities for the global dissemination of information, and so on – it is important to bear the continuities in mind also, learning the lessons of history when faced with what seems, on first blush, entirely new. The first reading, from Richard Butsch’s account of audiences through the centuries, illustrates the point that today’s debates over active versus passive audiences have a longer history than is generally realised.

Reading 1

Richard Butsch (2000) The Making of American Audiences: From Stage to Television, 1750 – 1990. Cambridge: CUP.

Popular and scholarly discussions of audiences have long lacked a historical context. Concerns about television viewing, for example, have almost never led to consideration of earlier concerns about radio listening or moviegoing, let alone popular nineteenth-century entertainments such as melodrama, minstrelsy, and vaudeville. Yet the very issues at the heart of debates today have been played out repeatedly, sometimes in the very same terms, sometimes after inverting these terms.

How *do* nineteenth-century stage entertainments compare to twentieth-century mass media? They differ sharply in institutional form and in technology. Scholars who study one seldom are familiar with the work of those who study the other. And yet there is a continuity of concern about audiences, expressed in the public discourses of the times. Common to all these forms of entertainment is concern about the dangers of and to audiences. Audiences have been worrisome to American elites ever since the Revolution. The written record is a continual flow of worries about social disorder arising from audiences and the consequent need for social control. While the underlying issues were always power and social order, at different times the causes of the problems of audiences had different sources. In the nineteenth century, the problem lay in the degenerate or unruly people who came to the theater, and what they might do, once gathered. In the twentieth century, worries focused on the dangers of reception, how media messages, might degenerate audiences. In the nineteenth century, critics feared *active* audiences; in the twentieth, their *passivity*.

These changes in the terms of discourse highlight the importance of historicizing the concept of audience. How public discourses construct audiences, how audiences conceive themselves, and what audiences do are historically contingent. Categories like “the audience” are socially constructed, their attributes typically described in terms of dichotomies. Such dichotomies define the current ideal, what is good, deserves reward, power, privilege.

[...]

In Elizabethan theaters, courtiers and gallants treated theater as their court where they could measure their importance by the attention they received. Fops sat on stage, interrupted performances, and even on occasion grabbed an actress. All of this annoyed the plebeian pit, who shouted, “Away with them.” But pittites were hardly meek. They too ate, smoked, drank, socialized, and engaged in repartee with actors. Restoration theater was more expensive and exclusive. Still, merchants and professional men, civil servants and their wives, and the critics (poets, writers, and competing playwrights) sat in the pit and squabbled, shouted, teased the women who sold oranges, baited the fops on stage, and wandered from pit to gallery and back. Nobility continued to sit on stage and in boxes, treating the theater as a place to chat, play cards, argue, and even occasionally duel.

By the mid-eighteenth century, London theatergoing was popular among all classes. The privileged continued to give scant attention to the play. Some still sat on stage until David Garrick, director of the Drury Lane Theater, finally succeeded in banning them in 1762. The reputation for rowdiness shifted to the gallery where journeymen, apprentices, servants (footmen) – many of whom could afford theater because they arrived after the featured play and paid only half price – lorded over those below. Instead of the individual display of courtiers of the previous era, this plebeian audience expressed collective opinions, sometimes to the point of riot.

This behavior represents not only an active audience, but a discourse through which audiences insistently constructed themselves as active. Audiences asserted their rights to judge and direct performances. There were two basic traditions of such audience sovereignty which can be characterized as those of the privileged and those of the plebeians – “the people.” The privileged tradition, rooted in the system of patronage, rested on the status of performers as servants to their aristocratic audience. As with other servants, aristocrats ignored, attended to, or played with actors, as they desired at the moment. It would have violated social order for aristocratic audiences to defer to performers by keeping silent and paying attention. Court theaters were more formal, ritualistic examples of this. More rambunctious examples were the private theaters frequented by young gentry. Aristocratic audience sovereignty affirmed the social order.

Lower classes too had an honored tradition of rights in the theater that were linked to street traditions of carnival and of crowd actions to enforce a moral economy. Carnival, practiced in parades, hangings, and other public festivities, granted such prerogatives to lower classes on certain occasions when normal social order was turned upside down. The carnival tradition extended to street theater such as *commedia dell'arte* and into popular theaters, which had a rowdier tradition of audience sovereignty. Carnival, like the lesser members of the theater audience, contained

lower-class rule within limits and elites to retain control of social order. But carnival also presented the threat of getting out of control.

[...]

Through the nineteenth century, public discussion focused on concerns about *active* audiences. As movies became popular in the early twentieth century, public debate shifted from a focus on audience behavior to worry about the movies' content and its effects *on* audiences, particularly on children. Attention shifted from the place to the play, from effects of dangerous people in those places to effects of dangerous media message on people. Audiences were being redefined from active to helpless, dependent, and passive, and would remain so through the rest of the twentieth century, as we will see. Concern about what audiences were doing was superseded by what was being done to them, or more precisely what they were learning from the entertainment that they shouldn't. Some of this was evident at the turn of the century when complaints about small-time vaudeville began to focus on the lewdness of the show. With the movies, however, the attention on the show and its effects clearly became paramount over concerns about activity in theater.

The focus of concern also shifted from women to children as the endangered group. Previously, middle-class women were the ones considered endangered and warned away from theaters and the people who frequented them. Now children were the endangered group, socialized into deviant behavior by movie content. This focus on children was part of many Progressive efforts of the times, and a new middle-class attention to childhood.

Perhaps most interesting in Butsch's account is the sketch of different kinds of audience from different periods, reminding us of what is too often forgotten when people worry about isolated, vulnerable or passive audiences, namely the liveliness, the whole-hearted engagement and the social complexity of participating in an audience (see Bennett, this volume).

Butsch is at pains to stress some theoretical points also, particularly the notion that audiences are institutionally planned for, and managed (as McQuail noted above). Audiences themselves know what is expected of them, and they develop habits or conventions of behaviour which fit these expectations. Further, the audience is discursively constructed within a strong moral framework highly concerned with the consequences of the key break between producers and audiences. For it is this break, this gap, which holds the potential for things going wrong – for messages being distorted, for audiences not paying proper attention, for producers losing touch with their audience, in short, for the unintended consequences of communication. This is less a concern with the media themselves than with the meanings, practices and divisions within a society which depends on the media.

Activity 2

Compare the social conventions (the setting, practices, expectations) for audiences at a classical concert, a music hall performance, the cinema and a political meeting. Use McQuail's six features of the audience, listed earlier, to classify differences and similarities. Compare these settings to the domestic conventions surrounding television viewing. For example, who do we expect to be present in these different audiences? What does it mean to 'behave well' in these different circumstances? How is order maintained and what happens when expectations are breached?

2.3 Twentieth century debates: oscillating between active and passive audiences

The legacy of ideas and concerns about the mass audience proved decisive in framing the new enterprise of social scientific investigation into the nature and effects of the mass media. Clearly, this is to skip over some crucial stages in a longer historical process, as the media themselves developed through the age of mass printing and what McQuail terms 'the dispersed reading public', through to the early days of film, with a return to a co-located audience (though not for a live and present communicator but rather for the vivid 'window on the world' of the cinema screen). Only following this do we get the history of broadcasting – radio as well as television – and this set the stage for the post-World War II expansion of audience research.

Looking back over the history of media, and media research, it is evident that research is strongly framed by the cultural and historical concerns of its time. Elihu Katz (1980) describes an oscillation between the two dominant views of the audience identified earlier – the liberal pluralist view of selective audiences and limited effects and the critical view of manipulated audiences and strong effects. In accounting for the swings of the pendulum, Katz stresses two mediating factors which stand between the media and their audience.

- First, selectivity. In Uses and Gratifications theory (Blumler and Katz, 1974), Katz asks not what the media do to people but what people do with the media because, as research readily shows, people are motivated, selected, active in their uses of the media. Others take this further, arguing that people are selective

also in their interpretation of the media, guided by their prior knowledge as well as by the media text.

- Second, interpersonal relations. In his ‘two-step flow’ hypothesis (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955), Katz argued that because people talk to each other about the media, any media message must pass through the lens of these conversations. Consequently, some people in a community – the ‘opinion leaders’ – are influential in mediating the effect of the media themselves.

Both of these factors led Katz and others to think that the audience is more active than passive, although under certain circumstances – historical, cultural or personal - neither is particularly effective. For example, during occasions of national crisis, people share a common anxiety about events and become highly dependent on the media for their information (Ball-Rokeach, 1985).

The influence of the media may also be expected to vary for particular segments of the audience, for people vary in their prior knowledge and interests, and in their access to alternative influences, including face-to-face communication. Moreover, as Butsch argued in Reading 1, some audiences have always been seen as vulnerable – women, for many centuries, and children, more recently. We will return to the image of women as a peculiar audience later, when we discuss the soap opera, but first we pursue the evidence for powerful media effects when it has been most often sought, namely in relation to children.

2.4 Setting the agenda: public concern and research on media effects

Scholars have traced a complex history of relations between public concern about media effects, public funding for research, media effects research itself and its impact on government policy (Rowland, 1983). Certainly the research agenda is uneven – many studies have examined the potential harmful effects of the media on children but few examined positive effects. Some argue that studies demonstrating harmful effects get published while those that fail to show effects don’t. More research is conducted at times of high public concern, often concentrated on the newest medium, while little funding is available for longitudinal studies following children over several years. And so on. These biases in the research agenda are rarely discussed. But this does not mean the research which has been conducted is misguided in and of itself though, as we shall see, researchers have faced other problems.

Illustration of baby watching television (from the Guardian) – or Farside cartoon

The majority of public interest and public funding, especially in America, has concentrated experimental research examining the short-term effects of media exposure on behaviours or attitudes – and most of it has focused on the child audience. Other prominent traditions not covered here have investigated the cognitive effects on adult public opinion of political news or that examining the reinforcing effect of media coverage on public attitudes and stereotypes of women, ethnic groups, crime and so forth (see Herbert, this volume). But although the experiments on children have proved the most controversial, each of these research traditions has produced roughly the same outcome. Whichever way one looks at it, it seems that the media can be shown, under specific circumstances, to have a variety of modest and inconsistent effects on some segments of the population. This tends to disappoint both the liberal-pluralists who want to know how to use media to appeal to the public and the critical scholars who fear that the media have considerable power over their audiences.

As Wilbur Schramm elegantly said, ironically at the outset rather than the conclusion of this research programme:

‘For some children, under some conditions, some television is harmful. For some children under the same conditions, or for the same children under other conditions, it may be beneficial. For most children, under most conditions, most television is probably neither particularly harmful nor particularly beneficial’ (Schramm, Lyle, & Parker, 1961, p.11)

On the other hand, George Gerbner argued persuasively that, since “television tells most of the stories to most of the people most of the time”, experiments comparing those who receive a short television exposure with a control group who do not are unlikely to demonstrate significant effects. His point is not that people are unaffected by the media but rather that everyone is already too much ‘under the influence’ for a brief experimental intervention to make any difference. As he says:

‘If as we argue, the messages are so stable, the medium is so ubiquitous, and accumulated total exposure is what counts, then almost everyone should be affected...It is clear, then, that the cards are stacked against finding evidence of effects’ (Gerbner, et al., 1986, p.21).

Whether the glass is half full or half empty - in other words whether this is taken as good news or bad news for research, for the media, for children – is a matter of policy and politics. Public policy and public opinion would rather not hear qualifications and excuses. And in a Parliamentary Briefing to the UK Government, a committee of psychologists concluded confidently that “screen violence can desensitise viewers, raise aggression levels, reduce empathy for victims and enhance the role of violence in conflict resolution” (Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, 1993).

So, what are these conclusions based upon? Let us backtrack and examine the experiments that have been conducted and their findings (Livingstone, 1996, for an overview).

2.5 What are the effects of the media?

The 'effects tradition' focuses predominantly but not exclusively on the effects of television rather than other media, on effects on the child audience especially, on the effects of violent or stereotyped programmes, and on effects on individuals rather than on groups, cultures or institutions. By and large, it tests the idea that exposure to particular media content changes people's behaviour or beliefs (while other research examines whether media reinforce existing beliefs).

Before examining whether media affect behaviour, research must establish a correlation between cause and effect – i.e. that the more we watch, the greater (or lesser) the behaviour. If there is no correlation, there is no point looking for a causal relation in which watching television actually brings about the change in behaviour. Generally, such correlations are found, though they are usually fairly small (e.g. Gerbner, et al., 1986). For example, children who watch more ‘violent’ cartoons – though note that there is a debate about what constitutes violence in cartoons – are likely to be more aggressive in the playground.

Causal relations are more difficult to establish, however. Is the correlation really due to some underlying third cause? Perhaps children who watch a lot of television come from homes both where other activities are lacking and where levels of aggression are higher? This would make the observed correlation between media and behaviour a spurious one, to be explained by the ‘third cause’ of social factors rather than by media

effects. The direction of causality is also a tricky issue. It could be that playing aggressively in the playground encourages watching violent cartoons on television ('the hypothesis of selective exposure'), so that the behaviour affects media use rather than the other way around. Interestingly, it turns out that research supports all of these hypotheses, including the causal one that media exposure influences behaviour ('media effect'), for social behaviour is multiply determined and no single factor accounts for something as complex as playground behaviour.

Given these competing hypotheses, media effects researchers have argued that only in controlled experiments can causal inferences be drawn concerning an observed correlation between media exposure and behaviour. The experiment includes two crucial features:

- First, people are randomly assigned to experimental and control conditions, so that any third causes that matter under everyday circumstances are neutralised, for they would apply equally to experimental and control groups.
- Second, the independent variable (the hypothesised cause - the media exposure) precedes the dependent variable (the hypothesised effect - the measured behaviour), so that the direction of causality within the experimental setting is established.

The classic experiment here is the so-called 'Bobo Doll Experiment' – in fact a series of experiments conducted during the 1960s by Albert Bandura (e.g. Bandura et al, 1961), a social learning theorist. Bandura and his colleagues showed children in the experimental condition a film of an adult hitting a large inflatable doll, while the control groups saw a different film or no film at all. He then left the children alone in a playroom for a short time with a variety of toys including the Bobo doll and watched how they acted.

Illustration from Bandura and the Bobo Doll

Social learning theory proposes that people learn to imitate what they see only if they see the behaviour being rewarded and not if they see it being punished. And this is what happened in Bandura's experiments. Children who saw a film of rewarded aggression were more likely to imitate the aggressive behaviour afterwards in the playroom than were children who saw punished aggression in the film or those who saw no aggression at all. Researchers have since argued that part of the significance of the study is that in everyday life, and especially in the media, children witness repeated instances of aggression and also they see that aggression being rewarded or approved rather than punished – hence one should worry much more about Superman or Indiana Jones than about classic 'baddies' in the media.

This kind of research has been replicated, varied and extended in many different ways. Reviews of the literature agree that viewers learn both pro-social and anti-social attitudes and behaviour from television portrayals – interestingly, with pro-social effects (like helping others or being generous) being more pronounced than anti-social effects. Research also shows some more complex findings – for example, violent images in the news affect older children more while younger children are more affected by cartoons. Younger children and, especially, boys, are much more likely to be influenced by anti-social contents. However, research is inconsistent over whether the effects last for very long – though some would say that, since children watch similar programmes every day, it hardly matters if the effects are only short-term, for they are never very far from their 'next dose'.

However, none of this need imply, and it certainly does not show, that beliefs or behaviours learned under experimental conditions can be generalized to viewers'

ordinary lives. Problematically, results which are relatively consistent under experimental conditions are poorly replicated under naturalistic or everyday conditions. This has led critics to argue that the experiment represents such an unusual situation that the results cannot be generalised (indeed, some say that all children learn from experiments is to meet researchers' expectations).

The debate, therefore, concerns not only the nature and consistency of the findings, but also whether the social characteristics of the experimental situation parallel everyday settings in which both viewing and, say, aggression occurs. This in turn has led some to conduct field experiments, which study the possible changes in children's ordinary behaviour as a result of an experimental intervention into an everyday setting – for example by positioning researchers as teachers in a nursery where children have time to get used to them and then, over some weeks perhaps, showing children in one nursery one kind of media content and children in a different nursery a different kind. Naturalistic measures of their subsequent behaviour (for example, how often they push or hit other children) can then be taken relatively unobtrusively. Yet, here too there are methodological debates about the design and techniques used in field experiments, with a crucial doubt expressed over whether third causes have been properly dealt with – for remember that random allocation to experimental or control groups may not be possible here. More worryingly, in the best field experiments – i.e. those based in the most everyday or ordinary settings, the effects tend to be small to non-existent.

We are faced with a less than ideal situation. Some conclude that the laboratory experiment demonstrates the existence of causal effects while the weak or absent effect of field experiments reflects their poor design and conduct. But others conclude that the laboratory experiment is too artificial to be generalized to everyday life while the lack of effects under naturalistic conditions justifies a 'no effects' conclusion. All agree that more research is needed, but what kind it should be, and how to justify it given the number of studies already conducted, is not easy to resolve.

3 Making sense of television: texts, audiences, meanings

3.1 From media effects to audience reception

Notwithstanding the critique of media effects research, most researchers do in fact believe that the media have effects – why study the media otherwise? Given that the media are thoroughly embedded in our lives, a major source of images and information, especially of social and political phenomena beyond our daily experience, how could we conclude that they have no effect on how we think or act? Most research therefore draws qualified, modest and contingent or contextualised conclusions regarding media effects, recognising that, as in any other social science field, we will not find the single definitive study which resolves debate. It is to this notion of contingency or context that I now turn.

I'll illustrate this with the reading by Ellen Seiter in which she describes a different kind of project on children and media effects. Seiter adopts a qualitative, ethnographic approach based on her lengthy and detailed observations when working in a nursery school. This leads her to critique the experimental approach and to replace it with a culturally-grounded analysis of media use. In Reading 2, why does she consider the cultural approach to be superior?

Reading 2

**Ellen Seiter (1999) *Television and New Media Audiences*.
London: Sage**

The scene is a classroom of four-year olds at an upper-middle-class nursery school in a US Midwestern suburb. About twenty children are present, fifteen of them boys. Two teachers are present, one is a woman in her late fifties, the other is a student teacher in her early twenties. It is late morning clean-up time, when the teachers attempt to secure the children's efforts to tidy up the classroom before the children go to the outdoor playground for recess.

Two boys are playing in a corner of the room with tiny toy cars. One is a slender, white, extremely talkative boy named Ian. The other is a small, Chinese-American boy named Wu. Bedlam is all around them.

A third boy, larger and older than Ian and Wu, approaches. His name is Michael. 'Can I play with you?' he asks.

'Sorry, but me and Wu are playing', Ian replies.

A few minutes later, a fourth boy, Casey, who is even larger than Michael and very rambunctious, joins them in play without asking permission.

While Casey plays with the cars and blocks he sings, 'Flintstones, meet the Flintstones have a yabba dabba doo time ...'

Ian and Wu are silent. After a pause in the singing, Ian strikes up some conversation:

IAN: Guess what? You know I heard that the Flintstones are going to see the Jetsons.
CASEY: You mean on the cartoons?
IAN: No, the show.
CASEY: On the Flintstones show they're going over to see the Jetsons.

The conversation fades out here and the boys continue playing until the student teacher approaches. She asks, 'What are you doing?' in an accusatory way that implies that they should be putting the toys away rather than playing with them.

In high-pitched, joking voices, the boys reply, 'We're trying to sort these [the blocks] out.' Lingered for a moment to check up on them, the teacher observes them hiding the tiny cars behind the blocks as they clean up. Clearly irritated with them for breaking a frequently repeated rules about returning toys to their rightful storage containers, the teacher switches to a commanding tone: 'I want Casey to put the cars away, Wu to put the big blocks away, and Ian to put the small blocks away.'

As she walks away, the boys erupt in laughter, exhilarated by their naughtiness and the discovery of their crime. Casey begins to sing again, and the other boys join in, singing loudly: 'Flintstones, meet the Flintstones.' As they sing, they grow more raucous, boisterous. Wu is laughing hard, intensely enjoying his inclusion in the singing of the song and the rebellion it signifies. The boys repeat the same song lyrics over and over again: 'Flintstones, meet the Flintstones.'

Michael, curious about the good time the three boys are having, wanders over and tries to join them again. Casey immediately grabs a plastic pan and rhythmically hits Michael over the head with it in time to the beat of the music, while singing ‘Have a yabba dabba doo time, a dabba doo time ...’

As a qualitative audience researcher observing this scene after some twenty hours of visits to this classroom, and nine months of visits to the school, I see in the boys’ classroom interaction the complex ways that popular television is embedded in interpersonal communications, in gendered conflicts, and in the exchange of tokens of cultural capital. To the student teacher walking over to break up the rough-housing between Casey and Michael, the scene might confirm the widely shared conviction among teachers that television produces violent behaviour in children and causes disruptions in the classroom. It must be admitted from the outset that qualitative audience research can do little to confirm or deny such a hypothesis about television’s effects. Qualitative research can, however, offer an interpretation of this scene that takes account of the contextual factors at work here, and the various uses of television as a form and topic of communication with others in social settings. The primary contribution of ethnographic audience research since the 1970s has been its demonstration that media consumption is embedded in the routines, rituals, and institutions – both public and domestic – of everyday life. The meanings of the media, whether in the form of print, broadcast, or recorded video, or computer forms, are inseparable from and negotiated within these contexts.

[...]

In this classroom scene, Ian and Casey, two boys who play together infrequently at school, use chat about *The Flintstones* and *The Jetsons* to make conversation. Later, when the boys join together singing the *Flintstones* theme song as a rebel call, Wu is especially exhilarated by it because he is often excluded by Casey from play – as are the other Asian children. On numerous occasions I have observed Wu strategically deploying his knowledge about toys and TV superheroes to gain entry into play situations with some of the dominant (and white) boys in the class.

[...]

It would be erroneous to infer that these three boys are avid fans of *The Flintstones*, for example. Although Michael, who initiates the reference to the cartoon, might recently have seen either the television or the live-action film version, released on video at about the time of this conversation, *The Flintstones* was not a frequent topic of his chat. Something about the blocks and the cars seemed to remind him of the Stone Age cars and garages on the cartoon – or perhaps the song had simply stuck in his mind. Rather than interpreting this scene as an instance of direct effects, it seems typical of the casual references, remembered jingles, and the like that children reuse for their own purposes (Buckingham 1993, 1996). In this case, the incongruous introduction of TV references into the classroom seems to work for the children and the teacher as a battle cry of rebellion. One of the most salient messages of this use of the *Flintstones* song is: I am doing something naughty, and I refuse to clean up.

[...]

If I had visited this classroom on a single day, I would have had no possibility of understanding the ways in which media references do and also do not serve young children's negotiations and friendships. It is significant, for example, that on many days when I visited the class no references to television were made within my hearing. It is equally significant that fights such as the one between Casey and Michael occurred very frequently, sometimes linked to the media, as in enacting *Power Rangers* karate kicks, and sometimes not. During my first days of classroom observations, the boys were curious, wary, and guarded around me. It was only after several weeks that Casey announced, after starting a fight nearby and looking at me, 'She's not a teacher!' and that the boys engaged in illicit behaviour within my hearing. Thus, doing ethnographic audience research necessitates making contact with informants repeatedly, for as much time as possible, and under as many different circumstances as possible.

Seiter emphasises three points. First, ethnographic research offers a very different methodology from the laboratory experiment. Second, only through ethnographic research can key features of the context of media use emerge. Third, interpreting these key contextual features leads to very different research conclusions.

Activity 3

Take a moment to elaborate each of these arguments, drawing on the reading to illustrate them. Do you find her case convincing? Are there some lessons here for experimental researchers? What scope do you think there is, within her nursery setting, to pursue questions of concern to experimental researchers or, a rather different question, to those concerned with public policy?

In fact, media researchers have always known that context matters, so that different groups in the audience, for various reasons, interpret media differently, making diverse uses of its content. Consider a famous piece of research conducted even before the days of television.

On 30th October 1938, one million Americans were terrified into believing that the Martians were taking over New Jersey during the radio broadcast of H.G. Wells' *The War of the Worlds*. This was partly because they did not hear the opening announcement – that it was a drama - and so interpreted the programme as an extended emergency news report (Cantril, 1940). So they packed their bags, flooded the churches or ran away. However, the other five million people in the audience were not terrified, for they applied various interpretative checks on what they heard. Some applied 'internal checks', like asking themselves how the Martians could take over so quickly, within the 45 minute time-frame of the programme. Others applied 'external checks', looking out of the window to see if the motorway was jammed or switching to another channel to see if the same 'news' was to be heard there. Further, some groups – more educated people, for example, or less religious people – were less influenced than others. My point is that an episode commonly cited as evidence for media effects more accurately provided evidence for limited effects, depending on key factors of audience selectivity, interpretation and social context.

Given both the difficulties of establishing direct media effects and the evidence for indirect or contingent effects of the media, a different approach to audiences is warranted. Instead of assuming that all members of the audience are influenced by media messages in the same way, we need an approach which assumes that:

- audiences are plural, diverse, variable
- the meanings of media texts are a matter of interpretation

- the consequences of media ‘exposure’ or use depend on the social context.

It seems that there is little empirical evidence to suggest that the audience is a homogenous mass of gullible dopes (though recall Gerbner’s caution about the limits of the empirical method here). Do we instead find evidence that audiences are selective and rational in their approach to the media, as the liberal approach would have it? And where does this leave the question of media power?

3.2 Contrasting models of the communication process

To ask about media power, rather than the effects of the media on its audience, we must return to the big picture. Thus, questions about audiences should be connected to questions about media institutions (broadcasters, producers, regulators, advertisers) and about media forms (technologies, channels, genres, contents). The above discussion supports two possible directions, each complicating any simple assumption of a direct relationship between production and audience.

The first approach, associated with the liberal-pluralist tradition, retains the key assumptions of effects research but argues that matters are more complicated. It asserts a linear communication process, following from Harold Lasswell’s (1948) influential challenge to early communication research, namely to discover ‘who says what in which channel to whom and with what effect’. This model is commonly summarised thus:

sender → message → receiver

Given the lack of empirical support for a direct path, many researchers acknowledge the contingent and contextual factors which complicate the process, framing these as intervening variables in the same linear process, albeit now a more indirect one, thus:

sender → (other factors) → message → (other factors) → receiver

Hence the number of stages in the communication process, and the number of factors which must be examined, is increased. For example, in figure xx – taken from George Comstock’s model of learning from television news – a series of intervening factors are included to account for the considerable limits on what people understand of and learn from the news. Still, the model remains linear, following the ‘transmission’ metaphor of communication in which media messages are treated as packages of meanings which are transported from the sender along a more or less hazardous path towards the receiver (Carey, 1989).

The critiques levelled at this model stimulated the development of an alternative model. One widely influential version of this from the critical tradition is Stuart Hall’s Encoding/Decoding model. This proposes a cyclic rather than linear view of communication and centres on processes (encoding, decoding) rather than on actors (sender, receiver). Hall adopts a semiotic view of media contents in which ‘the range of meaning depends very much on the nature of the language and on the significance attaching to the patterned arrangement of given signs and symbols within a culture shared by sender (encoder) and receiver (decoder) alike’ (McQuail and Windahl, 1993: 146) (c.f. Jessica’s chapter). However, he also acknowledges that the cultures of sender and receiver may not be identical – for each is structurally positioned differently in society, most notably in terms of social class. As a result, although Hall emphasises the power of the encoded text, he allows for the possibility that audiences can resist this power. Consider the contrasting figures in illustration xxx and complete Activity 4.

Illustration: Linear (Figure 3.6.1 p.87) and cyclic (Figure 5.3.1 p.147) from McQuail and Windahl (1993).

Activity 4

Compare and contrast these two models of the communication process. What have they in common and what are the key differences? Does it make a difference to focus on the social actors involved (producers and audiences) or the social processes (encoding and decoding)? Do the different models prioritise different research questions?

One difference between these models is that in the linear model the audience is placed at the end-point of the influence process. This makes it easier to ask how the audience is influenced by media than how it participates in the communication process (although some versions of the model have added feedback loops to indicate audience ratings, letters to the editor, etc). These questions of impact are more naturally asked from the standpoint of the sender, leading one to ask how much of what the sender intended actually reaches the audience and what gets lost or altered along the way.

Problematically, this leads to the question of what producers ‘intend’ (a difficult question given the complexity of media institutions) and to judge transformations in messages in terms of degradation, loss or bias as they pass from sender to receiver. It makes it harder to see that audiences also have intentions or – better – that they too are socially located, motivated and selective in their approach to (rather than their ‘response’ to) the media. It makes it particularly hard to see how audiences play an interpretative role in co-constructing the meanings of media messages. As McQuail, (1997: 89) puts it:

‘Early audience research had been framed in the shadow of a model of communication as a linear process of transmission of “messages” that privileged message “content” and its “impact” and treated audience “exposure” as an aggregate of unrelated individual selections. The important thing was for messages to be consciously received, registered, and effective ... The features of social life that “got in the way” of this were either to be treated as “noise”, interference, or as irritating inconveniences in the measurement process’.

By contrast, the cyclic model – and unfortunately Hall’s classic drawing poorly represents the cyclic process he proposed – acknowledges that audiences are embedded in a social context which shapes their engagement with media and that they engage in an active task of interpreting or decoding media messages which parallels that of constructing or encoding messages (c.f. circuit of culture - D318).

The features of social life which previously ‘got in the way’ become the focus of the analysis. The media message is no longer treated as a stimulus – a package of meaning whose contents are inflexible and obvious – but rather as a text whose meaning is polysemic, negotiable, to be interpreted (c.f. Jessica’s chapter). As the semiotician Umberto Eco explains,

‘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) ... result in making a message... an empty form to which various possible senses can be attributed’ (Eco, 1979: 5).

This is not to say that audiences are all powerful, however, for Hall (and Eco), working in the critical rather than the liberal/pluralist tradition, anticipate strong limits on the process of decoding. Particularly, Hall describes a powerful media industry dominating the encoding process, together with a normative social and material context heavily

constraining the interpretative activities of the audience. But these are empirical matters, as we see below.

3.3 Case study: the soap opera

Television is a prime example of the taken-for-granted. Its meanings appear unavoidable, they exist 'in' the programmes and leap out at us when we watch. But social scientists work to defamiliarise the familiar, so we can see how 'reality' is socially constructed through the considerable interpretative effort which goes into making sense of events, meanings and situations in everyday life. In seeking to analyse what Elihu Katz terms "viewers' work", audience researchers take seriously the idea that the media message is a text. In so doing, they draw on theories developed in the field of literary criticism to understand popular culture texts like the soap opera.

I have not picked the soap opera at random to illustrate this argument. The soap opera has long challenged audience research, partly because of its staggering success – in terms of the longevity of its series, the size of the audience and its huge global export market. But also because its audience has been one of the most vilified, soaps being widely derided as 'trashy programming for mindless housewives' (- recall Richard Butsch's argument about 'women and children' as the audience who need protection from media harms).

In critiquing such dismissive comments about women, and seeking instead to understand the pleasures they – and, indeed, many men – find in soap operas, audience researchers set out to re-evaluate the genre (Geraghty, 1990). They have taken as their starting point the argument that, as media contents are complex, multilayered texts, inviting semiotic analysis to unpack their meanings, then audiences are best understood as 'readers'. This text-reader metaphor has opened up a closer analysis of the relation between encoding and decoding in the mass communication process. How does this help?

Turn to Reading 3, from Robert Allen's introduction to his edited volume on the global success of the soap opera. Here he shows how the soap opera establishes a particular 'interpretative contract' with viewers. Thus the text anticipates what its reader (the viewer) already knows and what she wants to be shown next, guiding the viewer in certain directions according to conventions familiar to both text and reader. But the text also leaves open some opportunities – through a structured series of 'gaps' - for the viewer to think her own thoughts, draw her own inferences, assert her own preferences.

Reading 3

Robert C Allen (1995) "Introduction" in To Be Continued ... Soap Operas Around The World. London: Routledge

As literary theorist Wolfgang Iser has noted, the act of reading any narrative involves traversing textual terrain over time, as the reader moves from one word, sentence, paragraph, and chapter to the next. Or, in the case of cinematic or televisual narratives, from one shot, scene, sequence, or episode to the next. As readers or viewers we take up what he calls a "wandering viewpoint" within the text as we move through it, looking back upon the textual terrain already covered (what Iser calls retention) and anticipating on that basis what might lie around the next textual corner (protension).

Both processes occur in the gaps between words, sentences, and chapters (or shots, scenes, and sequences) – those necessary textual silences where we as readers/viewers are called upon to connect the words, sounds and/or images of the text to form a coherent narrative world.

The serial, then, is a form of narrative organized around institutionally-imposed gaps in the text. The nature and extent of those gaps are as important to the reading process as the textual “material” they interrupt. Each episode ends with some degree of narrative indeterminacy: a plot question that will not be answered until the next episode. In the US, where daytime serials are broadcast Monday through Friday, the greatest indeterminacy is left with the viewer at the end of the Friday episode, encouraging her, as the announcer’s voice used to say, to “tune in again next time” on Monday. These gaps leave plenty of time for viewers to discuss with each other both the possible meanings of what has happened thus far as well as what might happen next.

[...]

Non-serial popular narratives tend to be organized around a single protagonist or small group of protagonists and to be teleological: there is a single moment of narrative closure (obviously involving the protagonist) toward which their plots move and in relation to which reader satisfaction is presumed to operate. The classic example of this type of narrative is the murder mystery, in which the revelation of the murderer at the end of the story absolutely determines the movement of the plot. By contrast, the serial spreads its narrative energy among a number of plots and a community of characters, and, what is even more important, sets these plots and characters in complex, dynamic, and unpredictable relationship with each other. Because serials cut between scenes enacting separate plot lines, the viewer is prompted to ask not only “Where is each of these plot lines going?,” but also “What might be the relationship between different plot lines?”

It is at this point that we need to distinguish between two fundamentally different, but frequently conflated, forms of television serial: what I call “open” and “closed” serials. US daytime, British, and Australian serials are open narrative forms. That is to say they are the only forms of narrative (with the possible exception of comic strips) predicated upon the impossibility of ultimate closure. No one sits down to watch an episode of one of these programs with the expectation that this episode might be the one in which all individual and community problems will be solved and everyone will live happily ever after.

In a sense, these serials trade narrative closure for paradigmatic complexity. Just as there is no ultimate moment of resolution, there is no central, indispensable character in open serials to whose fate viewer interest is indissolubly linked. Instead, there is a changing community of characters who move in and out of viewer attention and interest. Any one of them might die, move to another city, or lapse into an irreversible coma without affecting the overall world of the serial. Indeed, I would argue that it is the very possibility of a central character’s demise – something that is not a feature of episodic series television – that helps to fuel viewer interest in the serial.

US daytime soap operas are “open” in another sense as well. Events in a daytime soap are less determinant and irreversible than they are in other forms of narrative, and

identity, indeed ontology itself, is more mutable. For example, generally, when a character dies in a fictional narrative (assuming we are not reading a gothic horror tale or piece of science fiction) we expect that character to stay dead. In soap operas, it is not unusual to witness the resurrection of a character assumed to be but not actually dead, even after the passage of years of intervening story.

[...]

Another distinguishing feature of open serials, particularly US daytime serials, is their large community of interrelated characters. More than half of all US daytime serial episodes are 1 hour in length and all are broadcast five days each week. As a result it is not uncommon for the cast of a daytime soap to include more than thirty regularly-appearing characters – not counting a dozen or more others who have moved away, lapsed into comas, been incarcerated or otherwise institutionalized, or are presumed dead. Furthermore, the audience comes to know some of these characters quite literally over the course of decades of viewing. In the nearly forty years that actress Charita Bauer played the role of Bert Bauer on *The Guiding Light*, her character evolved from young bride to great-grandmother. Viewers of *Coronation Street* have followed events in the life of character Ken Barlow since he was introduced in the show's first episode in December 1960. Thus, the community of soap opera characters shares with the loyal viewer a sense of its collective and individual history, which, in some cases, has unfolded over decades both of storytelling and viewing: the viewer who began watching *The Guiding Light* in 1951 as a young mother caring for infants might herself now watch with her grandchildren.

[...]

It is not uncommon to hear people who don't watch open serials complain that "nothing ever happens" in them. "Why bother watching every day or even every week," they puzzle, "when you can keep up with the plot by watching an episode a month." This complaint is grounded in two fundamental qualities of open serial narrative, but it also reveals an equally fundamental misunderstanding of how these narratives function and the nature of the pleasures they might generate. It is true that no story event will push the open serial narrative any closer to ultimate closure. It is also true that, compared to other types of popular narrative, the emphasis in soap operas is on talk rather than action. But, as we have seen, events in open serials take on meaning for viewers not so much in relation to their place in a syntagmatic chain but rather in terms of the changes in the paradigmatic structure of the community those events might provoke: if, after twenty years, Jason's father is revealed to be Ralph, then Jason must call off his engagement to Jennifer who is now revealed to be his half-sister, and he must come to terms with the fact that Jeremy, his nemesis, is also his half-brother! But, because he is not a regular viewer, the soap opera critic is ignorant of this complex paradigmatic structure and its history. Soap operas are to him merely so much syntagmatically inconsequential talk. To him, little changes from year to year in the soap opera community; to the competent viewer, however, each episode is loaded with important adjustments or possible alterations to that world.

To theorise this active role of the reader or viewer, Allen introduces some concepts from literary theory – particularly Wolfgang Iser's 'implied reader' (in the text) and its contingent relation with 'real' or 'empirical' readers (in the audience). He draws on Umberto Eco's distinction between open and closed texts to argue that some texts invite

readers to insert their own knowledge and interests while other texts work hard to eliminate this, being more directive in determining what meanings readers get from the text. Try Activity 5 to see how this works.

Activity 5

Think about a soap opera you are familiar with. Compared with a situation comedy or romance, what ‘contract’ does the genre establish with its audience? Imagine how a particular recent storyline could be variously interpreted by different audiences, depending on character preferences or response to the moral dilemmas portrayed. What difference does it make if you’ve watched for two weeks, two years or twenty years?

If you don’t watch soap operas, watch a couple of episodes and identify the kinds of knowledge – about characters, about ongoing narratives – which are taken for granted and which you may find confusing because you haven’t watched before. Start a conversation about the current storyline with a friend who watches this soap and notice what they are interested in and whether they interpret the episodes as you did.

Allen contrasts the syntagmatic dimension of the text (the sequence of events as they unfold) with its paradigmatic dimension (the set of possibilities from which any particular character, event or outcome is selected). Allen uses this idea to suggest that the sequencing in a soap opera is fairly predictable, although there are always gaps (especially, ‘the cliff-hanger’) for viewers to guess what will happen next. This predictability is what the person who doesn’t watch soap operas complains about. However, the paradigmatic dimension is full of competing options – who will overhear the secret, how will they react when it is discovered, who will they tell, will the viewer remember that X once had an affair with Y. And this, for Allen, is what gets the regular viewer so involved and what makes the narrative so absorbing and satisfying.

The key idea here is that audiences are ‘written into’ media texts themselves. But audience researchers are not just interested in ‘implied audiences’, particularly as the audience implied by or addressed by the text may or may not be the audience which actually interprets it. In other words, our original question of how audiences respond to the media has been radically reframed as a question of how implied audiences relate to empirical audiences. In asking how real people think and act in relation to particular texts, researchers have developed a range of methods for exploring the process of interpretation or decoding.

In the *Export of Meaning* project, Tamar Liebes and Elihu Katz (1990) investigated one particular thesis of media power, the idea of Americanisation or cultural imperialism. This thesis was epitomised for many by the unexpected global success of the American prime-time soap opera, *Dallas*. Commentators argued that powerful media were imposing a particular (i.e. American, consumerist, Christian) value system on the world. So, having conducted a textual analysis to identify the implied reader, Liebes and Katz showed an episode to small friendship groups from a range of diverse cultural settings in Israel, listening carefully for the ways people approached the programme spontaneously, inviting them to ‘retell’ the episode as if to someone who missed it, and analysing the social interaction in front of the screen as people collectively decoded the episode.

In Reading 4, Liebes and Katz analyse the discussion during one of these groups – three Jewish couples of Moroccan origin. On the left are the comments of the viewers (those numbered 10-14 occurred before the episode was played; those numbered 30-35 occurred during viewing; the discussion also continued afterwards). On the right, the researchers identify a series of categories to interpret the viewers’ interpretations of the episode. They did this intuitively, so you should check their interpretation, and also ask whether there is evidence here of other categories of audience response in this text?

Reading 4

Tamar Liebes and Elihu Katz (1990) The Export of Meaning. Cambridge: CUP (later ed., Polity)

10. MACHLUF: Don't forget that J. R. is very good-looking and very rich.

ZEHAVA: And what do people like? Money.

MACHLUF: Good-looking and rich is something which attracts many women.

11. CECILE: Everybody, more or less, also in the film, knows what he's worth.

ADI: What does that mean?

MACHLUF: His character, his character

...

CECILE: That he is not honest in business, with women, in everything. But nevertheless, women continually ...

MACHLUF: ... go after him.

CECILE: Anybody he wants ...

MACHLUF: ... gets caught in his net.

CECILE: ... fall very fast.

YOSSI: ... are attracted to him.

12. MACHLUF: Are attracted to him. Kristen, *zichrona livracha* ("her memory be blessed"), was also attracted.

YOSSI: The truth is, he's attractive; he's a good-looking fellow.

CECILE: They don't want to believe what they hear. They love him, and they don't want to accept the complaints against him. What one hears.

13. MACHLUF: You see, I'm a Jew wearing a skullcap, and I learned from this film to say (quoting from Psalms), "Happy is our lot" that we're Jewish. Everything about J. R. and his baby, who has maybe four or five fathers. I don't know. The mother is Sue Ellen of course, and the brother of Pam left; maybe he's the father ... I see that they're all

Referential forum: This leads to a discussion about social norms in interpreting the story. Machluf and Zehava draw on knowledge of life – and vice versa. They generalize about life, and this provides an interpretation of the story. Either way, they talk about *Dallas* as if it were real.

The group regularly refers to the serial as a film; we have retained this usage. It seems to connote a festive involvement to which one looks forward, etc.

Acculturation: *Zichrona livracha*, the traditional Jewish way of alluding to someone who has died, is used ironically in this case. The term still gives a sense of how the participants chat about *Dallas*'s characters as real people who live or, as in this case, die.

Moral evaluation: This is just one instance in which Machluf invokes quotations from religious sources as a way of relating to the invading word of television. Here a quotation is used to contrast and express the mores of *Dallas* with those of Jewish culture; thus, he reinforces traditional values.

bastards. Isn't that true Doctor Katz?
ELIHU: Really bastards or bastards in character?

MACHLUF: According to the movie, this son is literally a bastard. She was pregnant from Pam's brother.

14. CECILE: ... but the tests show that J. R. is the father ...

MACHLUF: ... and J. R. recognizes this himself. She told him the truth. She says: "I am pregnant from Pamela's brother." What's his name ...

ITZCHAK: Bobby ...

MACHLUF: No, no. Bobby is Pam's husband.

CECILE: Cliff. Cliff.

ITZCHAK: But, in fact he (J. R.) saw that it was his *son*.

GIL: OK, we're beginning. The program is starting.

Mutual aid: The debate over J. R.'s paternity points to the kind of involvement through speculation that *Dallas* arouses: the "facts" of the story turn out to be a matter of interpretation. Different, sometimes contradictory bits of information are brought forth as evidence for various ways of understanding the story. Machluf knows the baby is *not* J. R.'s and proves it with Sue Ellen's words: "She *told* him the truth." Cecile brings up the laboratory test as proof of the opposite.

[...]

30. YOSSI: The same story all the same time. He (J. R.) feels himself strong with his money. I'm telling you, who in Israel could get away with that?

Critical: Recognition of the formulaic character of the plot by Yossi is continued also in Yossi's next intervention.

31. MACHLUF: Akiva Nof, the member of Knesset, had a similar story with his wife. The journalists have shaken the whole country with Akiva Nof until now. In Israel he (J. R.) could not possibly behave in such a way.

Referential: By comparing J. R. to a member of the Israeli parliament who went through a well-publicized divorce case, Machluf is assuming (1) that *Dallas* reflects American society, (2) that America is corrupt, and (3) that Israel is not. Thus he again uses *Dallas* to reinforce his own values.

32. ZEHAVA: "The taste of life."

Critical: In order to support Yossi's argument, Zeheva quotes Coca-Cola's frequently broadcast commercial (in Hebrew). She chooses an example par excellence of America inundating the world with its idea of taste – the equivalent of *Dallas* in the area of material consumption – where (1) both represent American (consumer)

hegemony, (2) both are relentlessly repetitive, and maybe (3) both add flavor to ordinary life.

33. CECILE: (*on screen: Mitch is having breakfast with a plastic surgeon and his wife whom he saved from choking.*) But (please) without the bones.

Para-social interaction: In conducting a conversation directly with the characters, Cecile brings them into the living room, so to speak, so that she can joke with them, give them advice, and even criticize their actions. In rebuking the doctor, she introduces her own social norms, implying that his invitation to Mitch to come for a meal defines their conversation as something personal, so that offering money seems in bad taste.

34. MASSUDI: (*on screen: J. R. enters the court.*) He came without a jacket.
ZEHAVVA: (asked again to bring some tea) Well, I got an order from the captain, so I have to bring it.
CECILE: (*on screen: J. R. insults Pamela at the breakfast table.*) Now there's violence.

Understanding: Massudi, who cannot read the subtitles and claims she does not understand what is occurring on the screen (cf. note 3), nevertheless criticizes J. R. for not showing more respect to the court by dressing more formally.

35. MACHLUF: Why does Pam go to work? Her husband is so rich.
CECILE: But they have no satisfaction in life. So they search ...
YOSSI: Satisfaction in life.
CECILE: What does it mean, why does she go to work? What will she do? Wait until Bobby comes home?
YOSSI: Does she lack anything? Of course, she does not have to wait that much for her salary. She couldn't care less. I stand in queue at the bank on the first of the month.
CECILE: Too much money.
YOSSI: (*on screen: Another glamorous woman appears in a car.*) She doesn't work. (everybody laughs).

Forum: Although the group's discussion overtly deals with what is happening on the screen, they are, in effect, making use of *Dallas* to enter into a debate on the roles of the sexes. Machluf and Yossi voice the traditional position in this debate, while Cecile brings up the concept of the right of women to self-realization. (This discussion happens to follow closely after Zehava's joking remark about getting an order from "the captain.")

The researchers' analysis of the text had suggested that *Dallas* centred on 'primordial themes' - lineage, inheritance, sibling rivalry, property, sex and marriage. Yet the empirical audience study found that viewers of different social and cultural backgrounds generated different interpretations. For example, Russian Jews were more likely to make ideological readings responding to the moral and political themes underlying the narratives. Americans focused more on the personalities and motivations of the characters to make their readings coherent (Allen's paradigmatic dimension).

Moroccan Arabs instead emphasised event sequencing and narrative continuity (Allen's syntagmatic dimension). And while each group's reading was clearly constrained by the text, each also engaged with the openness of the text to draw on their diverse cultural resources, resulting in divergent readings of the 'same' programme. What is less obvious is how to theorise these cultural resources: Liebes and Katz's groups vary in terms of ethnicity, nationality, religion and social class, and it is not clear which factors make a difference in the groups' decoding of different aspects of the text.

This project is widely cited as countering the idea of cultural imperialism - showing how audiences may actively resist dominant media messages. As David Morley (1993: 17) notes, 'local meanings are so often made within and against the symbolic resources provided by global media networks'. And, more generally, Klaus Bruhn Jensen (1993:26) argues that 'reception analysis offers insights into the interpretive processes and everyday contexts of media use, where audiences rearticulate and enact the meanings of mass communication. The life of signs within modern society is in large measure an accomplishment of the audience'.

3.4 Consolidating the audience reception approach

Illustration (from my J Comm article, 1990) – cartoon of family watching tv, all with different interpretation of what's on the screen

A range of audience reception studies have explored how audiences interpret and use different media, mainly focussing on television genres. Audience interpretations or decodings have been found to diverge depending on viewers' socio-economic position, gender, ethnicity, and so forth, while the possibilities for critical or oppositional readings are anticipated, enabled or restricted by the degree of closure encoded into the text or genre.

For example, Morley's study (1980) of audience decodings of the current affairs magazine show, *Nationwide*, found audiences to diverge as a function of their socio-economic and labour market position. Predictably, given that Morley explored understandings of the news, audience decodings were politically framed. In focus groups, bank managers and schoolboys made 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 trade union shop stewards, took an oppositional position, using the resources of the text to construct a critical reading quite unintended by it. A few viewers were alienated from the text as it did not afford them a reading congruent with their own cultural position (for example, black further education students). This division of audience reception into dominant, negotiated and oppositional positions, as proposed by Hall (1980), has guided much subsequent research.

To take another example – this time showing how reception studies on children have advanced beyond the 'effects paradigm' – Patricia Palmer's *The Lively Audience* (1986) showed the importance of age, gender and family circumstances. Hence, "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). After the age of 8 or 9, children prefer more realistic and complex programmes instead of the cartoons or toy animal shows they liked earlier. More importantly, they interpret shows differently as they learn to make subtle judgements about genre expectations, the sequencing of narratives, the realism of what is portrayed and the relation between the drama and their own lives. But this doesn't mean they simply copy televised events or display shared media experiences but rather – as we saw in Ellen Seiter's work – they use media to

define their identities, to negotiate friendships through role play and to work out rules for social interaction in the playground.

We have, then, three arguments for the active engagement of audiences with the mass media. First, audiences must interpret what they see even to construct (or decode) the message as meaningful and orderly, however routine this interpretation may be. Second, the experience of viewing is socially and culturally located, so that viewers' everyday concerns, experiences and knowledge become a resource for the interpretative process of viewing. Third, audiences diverge in their interpretations, generating different readings of the same media text. These differences may be anticipated by an open text, though at other times they are readings 'against the grain' of a closed text. Interestingly, sometimes viewers are playful, reflexively self-conscious in their critical or creative approach to the conventions of the text. Audience creativity and heterogeneity is not unlimited, however, for viewers' social positions are structurally constrained. Hence, viewers diverge in their interpretations and uses of media according to their gender, ethnicity, political and class identities, age, personal experience, nationality and other factors.

In consequence, audience researchers have come to agree on several points. First, one should not make assumptions about how audiences will perceive a text from knowledge of the text alone – and so media analysis should combine studies of production, text and audience rather than study each separately. Second, one cannot talk of the audience in the singular or, indeed, of the singular meaning or impact of particular media contents – and so audiences must always be located within specific everyday social contexts. Third, media power is a two-way interactive process, even though many of the cards remain in the hands of the media producers and even though audiences are more constrained by their own circumstances than free to read anything they like into a text – and so the myth of direct media effects and of passive vulnerable audiences should be at last laid to rest.

4 Where next for active audiences?

4.1 Critical responses to audience reception research

In parallel with the developing arguments, methodological explorations and emerging findings of audience reception studies, there have been various criticisms of this work.

Activity 6

By now you will probably have thought of a number of doubts, questions or criticisms of this work on audience reception. Perhaps you know about other research which would argue against the findings of reception studies. Take a moment to list any such criticisms. Does the empirical research outlined above seem to you to fit the cyclic model of communication well? Is it perhaps also compatible with the linear, effects tradition? What qualifications or extensions of audience reception research would you want to see next?

The research community has held a lively debate regarding the theoretical and empirical claims of reception studies, as follows:

- *Identifying the implied reader.* How confidently can we identify the dominant meanings (Stuart Hall's 'preferred reading') in media texts? Analysis of audience response rests on a prior analysis of media texts and genres. If we cannot reliably identify the textual gaps, the degree of openness or closure, the

conventions of the genre, etc then how can we know when the text is guiding the reader and when the reader/viewer is being creative or resistant?

- *The limits of audience activity.* Many are concerned that audience research has exaggerated the extent of audience activity, overestimating the power of the audience compared with the power of the media. John Fiske's celebration of the 'sovereign viewer', faced with the 'unlimited semiosis' (or 'semiotic democracy') of the text, famously attracted many counterclaims pointing to structural limits on audience diversity and, more important, the audience's resistance to ideology or cultural imperialism.
- *The problem of contextualization.* Research has looked for various demographic and contextual factors shaping viewers' orientation to the media. But these hardly encompass the complexities of everyday life. So, should the moment of reception be contextualized in what Paul Willis calls 'the whole way of life'? It seems that the more research explores contexts of media use (to avoid 'media-centrism') the less attention is paid to the moment of reception or the media text. And the more a specifically social analysis is lost in charting individual variability within the audience.
- *Competing theories.* 'Audience reception theory' masks key differences in theoretical origin and orientation. It draws on social constructivist social psychology (asking how people make sense of social life), on feminist media studies (re-evaluating the marginalised or ridiculed media often enjoyed by women) and on anthropological or ethnographic studies of everyday contexts of mass consumption, to name but some traditions. And despite the interconnections between literary (Eco, Iser, Allen) and critical (Hall, Morley, Seiter) approaches, these differences also matter.
- *The end of the audience?* It is apparent that most research centres on television viewers and on well-established genres – soaps, news, children's shows, etc. But television is changing, diversifying and, most important, converging with new media to create a complex media-rich environment. Is this the end of the mass audience or will the lessons of mass audience studies continue to be relevant in the new media environment?

There are no simple answers to be had, for research generates many new questions along the way. So, these important criticisms set the agenda for the next stage of audience research. I will end on the last issue, bringing the history of the audience (as described by Butsch and McQuail) up to date by considering how the changing media environment challenges the concepts and methods developed thus far to understand media audiences.

Illustration: Junior's ideal bedroom (highly media-rich bedroom - picture drawn by child I interviewed (*Young People and New Media*)).

4.2 Changing contexts, changing media

Audience researchers are faced with a moving target as once-'new' media become familiar and ever-newer media emerge. Television is changing, diversifying, becoming increasingly segmented, globalised, narrowcast, fan-based. The home contains multiple sets, each with multiple channels, converging with other information and communication technologies - with telephony, radio, computing, and even print – much of this convergence mediated by the internet. As a result, the activity of viewing to which we have devoted so much attention is converging with reading, shopping,

playing games, going to the library, writing letters, and so forth. And it occurs anytime, anyplace, anywhere.

We don't know how to describe the audience for new media. 'Audience' fits the activities of listening and watching. New information and communication technologies open up more active and diverse modes of engagement with media - playing, surfing, searching, chatting, downloading. So, rather than each new medium replacing what went before, in practice we find an accumulation of modes of 'audiencing' (Fiske, 1992) - as we add listening to reading, viewing to listening, surfing to viewing, and so on.

We could say 'users' - media users, users of the internet, etc - but this is rather individualistic and instrumental, losing the idea of a collectivity which is central to 'the audience'. After all, mass communication has always been communication from the one to the many; however, on the internet, most obviously, communication is increasingly one-to-one or peer-to-peer rather than mass communication, so we must now ask, rather than assume, how far mediated communication leads to a shared or communal understanding. Also, 'user' doesn't necessarily relate to communication at all, for it applies just as well to users of the washing machine or toaster. In other words, the more we focus on varieties of media technologies, the more audience research shifts away from questions of reception and moves into asking questions about the consumption of goods or services.

Even assuming we continue to use the term 'audience', along with 'readers', 'fans', 'viewers', etc. as appropriate, we should bear in mind the historically different notions of 'audience'. Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) identify three broad phases in audience history:

- The simple audience - face-to-face, direct communication, in public, often highly ritualised - as in the theatre or political meeting
- The mass audience - highly mediated, spatially - even globally - dispersed, often in private - as in the newspaper readership or television audience
- The diffused audience - strongly dispersed and fragmented, yet at the same time embedded in or fused with all aspects of daily life; characterised by routine and casual inattention and yet always present - as in the 'always on' internet connection, multitasked with television, conversation and working from home.

Their point is that although these phases are historically sequenced, new phases add to rather than replacing older phases, resulting in three simultaneous contemporary modes of audience experience. So, while people still form part of simple and mass audiences, the diffused audience raises some new questions for, as Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998: 36-7) say, 'the qualities and experiences of being a member of an audience have begun to leak out from specific performance events which previously contained them, into the wider realms of everyday life' - linking leisure with work, education with entertainment, the public realm of the community with the private domain of the home.

Activity 7

List of media your grandparents' and parents' generation grew up with at home. Compare this with the media you yourself grew up with and then with that of children today. What are the similarities and differences? How do you think these make a difference to childhood and to the audience? For example, does it change the things people (parents and children? friends?) share in common? Does it make it easier to pursue individual tastes?

Some changes turn out to be fairly predictable. For example, media typically start out as household possessions and are gradually transformed - getting cheaper, smaller,

more mobile – into personal possessions in a media-rich household. Consider the transformation of the telephone into the mobile phone, the wireless into the transistor radio, the household television into the portable or bedroom set, the desk top computer into the laptop.

What are the consequences of such changes? We might speculate as follows.

- The multiplication of personal media (walkman, mobile phone, laptop computer) seems to encourage the social process of *privatisation* (the ‘bedroom culture’ of young people, for example), undermining that participation in a shared culture and a public space which a national mass media arguably once supported.
- The diversification of media contents – multiple television channels, the world wide web, musical subcultures – seems to encourage the social process of *individualisation* (or perhaps ‘subculturalisation’), transforming the culture from one in which parents socialize children according to well-established traditions to one in which each new generation feels free (even, is required), to invent its own lifestyle, its own ‘project of the self’, using the resources of the media (see Thompson, 1995).
- Since many of these new media and media contents are transnational in their scope, it seems that audiences are increasingly *global* whereas previously they were mainly national or local. Do audiences share more with others across the globe than with their next door neighbours (see Gillespie’s chapter in this volume)?
- The *interactivity* of new media, especially the internet, is something we have yet to theorise. New interactive technologies put the interpretative activities of the audience or user at the very centre of media design. On the internet, for example, there is no text beyond the home page without an active reader clicking, selecting, ignoring, contributing, etc, making the text-reader metaphor of reception studies particularly apt.
- So, what are the emerging genres of new media and how do these open up, guide or close down on audiences’ interpretation, indeed their active creation of the dynamic flow of new media texts (- the path through the web, the to-and-fro of chat, the outcome of the online game, the intertextual mixing of different media contents)? And how does the social context – particularly as people blur learning and leisure, information and communication, production and reception – shape their engagement with media?

Speculation requires empirical investigation rather than *a priori* assumptions about audiences. It should be clear from this chapter that audiences are often unpredictable and diverse, making predictions about audiences which are ‘read off’ from media technologies or texts hazardous, even foolhardy. Hence, we must avoid asking the familiar questions about effects for new media as was asked of old media. And we must resist assumptions from the public and policy makers which assume media impacts on a vulnerable, decontextualised and homogenised audience. Rather, we need to examine carefully how new and old media are being used together, across diverse social contexts, in order to understand how they become embedded in – both shaping and shaped by - our everyday lives and symbolic world views.

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