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Book section

Original citation:

Livingstone, Sonia (1999) Mediated knowledge: recognition of the familiar, discovery of the new. In: Gripsrud, Jostein, (ed.) Television and Common Knowledge. Routledge, New York, USA, pp. 91-107. ISBN 0415189292

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Available in LSE Research Online: April 2015

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Originally published as:

Livingstone, S. (1999) Mediated knowledge: recognition of the familiar, discovery of the new. *Television and common knowledge* (Ed., J. Gripsrud). London: Routledge.

Mediated knowledge**Recognition of the familiar, discovery of the new**

Sonia Livingstone

Mediated knowledge and active audiences

The modern mass media possess a hitherto unheard-of power to encode, preserve, manipulate, reproduce and circulate symbolic representations of knowledge. In this paper I shall address the relationship between audiences and mediated knowledge, using the opportunity to consider some broader problems currently facing audience reception research. How shall we think about the relationship between audiences and mediated knowledge, why are audiences not overwhelmed by the constructive power of the media, and in what ways, if any, are audiences the beneficiaries of mediated knowledge? Much depends on how we conceptualise the audience. Thus we may regard audiences as citizens who need knowledge for informed participation and public opinion (the public right to know, public service ethic, etc.; Corner 1991). We may see them as consumers who place some market value on having their social surveillance or informational needs met by the media (Rubin 1984). Or we may see them as workers in need of diverting entertainment whose uncritical stance makes them vulnerable to varieties of misinformation (including significant silences and overrepresented mainstream images of society; Gerbner and Gross 1976; McCombs and Shaw 1972; Noelle-Neumann 1974).¹

My analysis is partly based on broadening out an argument developed during an empirical text-reader analysis of 'audience discussion' or audience participation programmes (Livingstone and Lunt 1994). In this new genre it is more than usually unclear whether the audience is best conceived of as the public/citizen-viewer, the consumer, or the mindless and voyeuristic masses (as I shall argue later, this generic ambiguity may be part of the appeal). Programmes such as the American *Donahue* and *Oprah Winfrey* and the British *Kilroy* and *The Time, The Place* centre on the studio audience, thus involving potential participation, access and interpretative activity from the audience both at home and in the studio (Bierig and Dimmick 1979; Rose 1985). Topical social, moral and political issues are debated by a mixed studio audience of experts and lay people, and the discussion varies in approach and seriousness depending on topic, host and target audience. Unlike many other media forums, the genre specifically focuses on publicizing the experiences of ordinary people, often members of marginalized social groups. Viewers and participants, as well as critics, are ambivalent about these programmes; are studio debates a new form of public space or forum, part of a media public sphere, or are they a travesty of political debate with no 'real' consequences?

The project relates to audiences and mediated knowledge in two ways. First, *what* can viewers come to know through this genre – a question of lay knowledge and its relationship to media. Second, *how* may viewers come to

know about the world (including their place in it) from media representations – a question of lay epistemology and its relationship to media. Our analysis suggested that the question of lay knowledge depends significantly on the question of lay epistemology.² Thus it may be more productive to regard the interaction between text and viewer not as a potential clash of knowledge (what the text ‘tells us’ versus what the viewer knows from elsewhere) but as a negotiation on the appropriate ways of knowing, for epistemological assumptions frame both images in the text and the relevance of viewers’ daily experiences to the process of viewing. A central means by which this genre, and by extension other groups, manages the construction of particular kinds of knowledge is by managing the various discursive positions available to the participants (expert and lay), and thus establishing what it is legitimate for each to say and in what manner utterances should be regarded by the studio and home audiences. While mediated knowledge depends on the genre or ‘interpretative contract’ between text and reader (Livingstone 1998a), the audience discussion programme specifically problematizes this contract by mixing generic formats in its version of ‘infotainment’ in a manner suggestive of future trends in evolving media genres and modes of address.

Textual analysis of discussion programmes reveals a multiple, often confused, mode of address in which, for example, experts are requested to inform the public and then ridiculed for their jargon; similarly, the host stimulates opposition to accepted views and then claims to be on the side of the majority (typically constructed as the ‘underdog’). Some studio participants take part because it seems like fun or they find the media glamorous; others claim a public service motive, wanting to exercise a perceived right to have their say, contribute to public debate and inform people of their experience. Viewers are divided in their response to the genre. For some, experts are trained professionals who should inform and convince us, and accordingly deserve respect and time to develop their arguments; for others, the label of expert depends on who makes the best contribution and is as likely to be applicable to a member of the public as to a professional. For the former group of viewers, the logic of an argument is a key criterion in assessing a debate; for others, logic may be a means of exclusion, and the breadth of a debate, particularly insofar as it includes ordinary people we do not usually hear on television, offers a better criterion of assessment.

How audiences relate to a specific genre, what they consider to be of value and how they position themselves in relation to it all frame what they may gain from it, in terms of ‘what knowledge’ is at stake. If experts are considered to be lacking in personal experience while ordinary people are seen as authentic, the value of what each says will be regarded differently than it will be by those who consider that experts are more credible and more knowledgeable than ordinary people. Those who most value the contributions of ordinary people are most likely to feel that they gain something from watching and that their own perspective is represented among the opinions expressed (Livingstone, Wober and Lunt 1994). How viewers respond to the implicit invitation of this genre to identify home with studio audiences is a matter not only of interpretation, but also of identity – involving the positioning of oneself in relation to perceived others, including those on television. This is particularly pertinent to genres which are presented as primarily concerning ordinary people ‘just like you’ (in

contrast to the elite world of early television or the middle-class world of 1950s television, these offer the dialects, the dialogue and the diversity of 'everyday life'). Do viewers accept this representation of 'ordinary people', or do they consider the studio audience to be 'idiots' or people acting a part? Are the experts 'expert' or patronizing time-wasters? Are the single parents in the studio debate relevant to viewers' own lives as single parents or is the divorce under discussion like their divorce? Not only are the debates in the studio often heated, so too are the debates in front of the set, for the negotiation of the genre is also a negotiation of oneself and one's relations with others. In this sense the personal is political, and the social dramas enacted among the studio participants are significant insofar as they serve to reproduce the identities and perceived legitimacy of the various participants.

Towards a research agenda for mediated knowledge

Questions of what knowledge the media may offer and of how audiences do or might come to know it form part of a broad research agenda which we can derive by characterizing the significance of the modern media in terms of 'the institutionalized production and diffusion of symbolic goods; the instituted break between production and reception; the extension of availability in time and space; and the public circulation of symbolic forms' (Thompson 1990: 219), as follows:

- *Who knows?:* questions of the transmission of knowledge and of differential access to ideas and knowledge (e.g. inequality, marginality and knowledge gaps), the extent to which audiences are becoming homogenous or fragmented, what knowledge resources audiences may draw upon in engaging with media, who is considered expert (whose knowledge counts, is considered worthy of transmission and, as a consequence, who has the power to produce rather than consume mediated knowledge).
- *How do we know?:* questions of changing modes of communication from face-to-face to mediated communication (how is knowledge mediated, how is it constructed in the presence or absence of recipient feedback or reciprocity, what is the significance of para-social interaction, are new forms of interactivity becoming available).
- *What do we know?:* questions of the implications and consequences of extended space-time availability (what can be known, what is the relationship between global and local contexts of use, how is knowledge contextually dislocated and re-embedded, how is knowledge transformed in the process of this dislocation and re-embedding).
- *Whose knowledge is being (re)produced?:* what are the implications of different kinds of mediated knowledge for the boundary between public and private, for the public sphere, for the regulation of knowledge, and for the political voice of elite and marginalized groups.

The dimension of time is crucial to this agenda, for the kinds of mediated relationships available are undergoing continuous change and diversification. Forms of media, and the rapid changes which these are undergoing, raise new

questions about communicative relations between media and audiences (and among audiences, insofar as these are mediated).³ This changes, and locates historically, our understanding of what knowledge, whose knowledge, how it is mediated and to whom. The emerging mixed 'infotainment' genres and new multimedia formats render problematic key terms hitherto standard in discussions of mediatized knowledge – expert, information, recipient, discursive rules, ignorance, personal experience. Thus in access or viewer-made programmes (e.g. in Britain, *Video Diaries*, *Video Nation*) ordinary people may be producers as well as the recipients of programmes, the lay public may seek to inform as well as be informed by the supposed experts in a field, and personal experience may be validated as worthy knowledge, while expert facts may be rejected as irrelevant or ungrounded. Indeed, the problems raised may be seen as the point of the genre, for what gives audiences pleasure is not only learning about how others live, or seeing their own lives in the context of others, but also debating the value of hearing from ordinary people, what the outcome of a discussion was, how it related to one's own experience, whether the experts had a valuable contribution to make, and so forth. The talking heads, expert commentary and careful sequencing of argumentation of the documentary genre, for instance, may be implicitly questioned by these other formats.⁴

The four questions of mediated knowledge outlined above may be mapped on to the standard tripartite organization of the field of media and communication. The study of texts, production and audience raises issues concerning media and knowledge. The most obvious focus for such issues is questions of representation: what do we know and what kinds of knowledge do the media represent or convey or construct? A second focus locates these questions in relation to media institutions: whose knowledge, by what organizational means and purposes, and in whose interests is such mediated knowledge constructed? And, third, what of the audience: who knows, or what role does mediated knowledge play in their lives and how does mediated knowledge relate to other forms of everyday knowledge and experience? The significance of the audience, once a separate topic or even a legitimate omission from media theorizing, has recently come to be taken for granted,⁵ notwithstanding concerns about whether the media are being used primarily for communication among elites rather than from elites to the laity (Schlesinger and Tumber 1994; see also the debate on the role of the media in the public sphere in Curran 1991; Garnham 1990). The addition to the above agenda of the question of *how* we know focuses attention once more on the form or channel of communication (Lasswell 1947; McLuhan and Fiore 1967), more recently discussed by Meyrowitz (1985).

Theorizing knowledgeable audiences

Despite paying relatively little attention to the forms or channels of communication (see later), a central achievement of Hall's (1980) encoding–decoding model was to emphasize the dynamic interrelations among the three elements of text, production and audience, moving us away from the limitations of hitherto dominant models which arranged them in a broadly linear and unidirectional path from sender via message to receiver. Questions of media and knowledge, under this latter model, had become questions of how elites use the

media to inform, educate, persuade or control the laity, with their success depending in part on the efficiency of the communication channel and the receptivity of the audience. The theoretical and methodological difficulties encountered by media-effects research have led many to consider other ways of asking about the relationship between mediated representations and audiences (Livingstone 1996), although various specific models of how mediated knowledge may inform audiences continue to enjoy some success (e.g. agenda-setting, cultivation theory, knowledge gaps; Fejes 1984).

Carey (1975) has been particularly critical of the imperialist presumptions behind this 'transmission' model of communication. As a consequence of these and similar critiques, the very notion of knowledge has become problematic for media scholars, for to ask about knowledge may appear to suggest the return of supposedly doomed lines of inquiry concerned with administrative control, media effects or media imperialism – models which are taken vastly to under-estimate the institutional/epistemological basis of media production, the polysemic/multilayered complexities of message meanings and the interpretative and contextualized activities of the (plural) audiences. Even Hall's encoding–decoding model has been criticized for a similar tendency to revert to the transmission model through the concept of the 'preferred reading', the means by which Hall retained some determining power for the text over its readers (Grossberg 1994; see also interview with Stuart Hall in Cruz and Lewis 1994).

Yet it is not so evident from Carey's work that he meant to halt research on the transmission of information; rather, he intended to supplement it with questions of meaning, performance, tradition and interpretative community through a 'ritual' model of communication. This model focuses on the ways in which knowledge is socially generated from the activities and relations of an interpretative community (Schroeder 1994) rather than imposed from on high for the supposed benefit of an ignorant and needy mass. The media are conceived of as a resource by which, almost irrespective of their institutional purpose, meanings are circulated and reproduced according to the contextualized interests of the public. Knowledge becomes, not the pedagogy or propaganda of the transmission model, but the *habitus*, the shared representations, the lived understandings of the community.⁶

Undoubtedly, many analyses of texts and audiences have been productively fuelled by this ritual model of communication. For example, Taylor (1989) insightfully analyses the popularity of family and workplace-based situation comedies as providing an expression of culturally and socially generated anxieties about changes in family and work arrangements, particularly during the 1970s. Work on soap opera suggests that, whatever its possibly hegemonic message about the limitations of women's lives, the genre is used by audiences to celebrate the strengths of women and local communities (Hobson 1982; Seiter *et al.* 1987). Similarly, the topics of talk shows are suggestive of the range of contemporary cultural anxieties, while some hosts (Squire 1994) and viewers regard the genre as an opportunity to express, even celebrate, ordinary experience (especially that of women).

Recognition of the familiar, discovery of the new

Such culturally informed work has seemed more successful recently than that conducted under the transmission view, where studies of how media have changed knowledge or attitudes or brought about different behaviours or values have been fraught with methodological and theoretical problems, not least as regards the assumptions about the kinds of knowledge supposedly conveyed by the media⁷ and about the kinds of prior knowledge supposedly held by audiences.⁸ However, the kinds of research studied under the ritual communication model are not accidental; they deal primarily with media portrayals of everyday life, portrayals of a world about which we have prior knowledge and which we can match up to our own lives so as to appropriate or recontextualize media images with relative ease. Such immediacy, such familiarity of reference points (albeit a constructed familiarity, a cultural achievement), facilitates questions about circulation of familiar images, about the appropriation of meanings into different personal and domestic contexts, and about how different backgrounds support different kinds of readings. Clearly, many media images concern the representation of that for which we have personal, located experiences; their significance may thus be understood through processes of recognition, validation and reinforcement. Modleski's (1982) analysis of the parallels between the textual rhythms in the soap opera and the domestic rhythms of women's daily lives (repetitive, cyclic, constrained in their opportunities, etc.), and the immediacy with which Schlesinger *et al.*'s (1992) female audiences related to images of violence against women provide good examples. The knowledge at stake concerns processes of re-knowing, and of coming to value and find pleasure in, what is already familiar.

Yet when we stand back and think about media and knowledge these are not necessarily the first kinds of knowledge which come to mind. Surely the amazing thing about the modern mass media is that we gain all kinds of knowledge about the world that we precisely did not have before – about other countries, past periods in history, other lifestyles, inaccessible institutions (the Houses of Parliament, law courts) or rarely encountered places (hospitals or prisons), even inside our own bodies via medical science programmes. We meet unique people (the president), unusual people (the oldest person on earth), people unlike ourselves (the aristocracy) – and so forth and so forth. Mediated knowledge is not just about recognition of the familiar or legitimation of the known, but also about the discovery of the new, about becoming familiar with the unknown, about legitimating the hitherto marginalized. The media have 'created what we could call a "mediated worldliness": our sense of the world which lies beyond the sphere of our personal experience, and our sense of our place within this world, are increasingly shaped by mediated symbolic forms' (Thompson 1994: 34) – we know about places and times we have not personally visited, and when we do visit them it is from within that knowledge context.⁹

To understand the significance of such ready access to diverse images we need both models of communication; new ideas and knowledge are indeed transmitted to audiences by those who have direct access to such specialist sources and places (and the imperialist connotations of this process are often appropriate), but we also need a ritual model to understand such knowledge in terms of local meanings and shared assumptions, not simply in terms of the supposed accumulation of information. Information is significant only insofar as it becomes known, is appropriated and made useable by being incorporated into

and interpreted within the set of assumptions and understandings of everyday life. Otherwise it washes over us, as do most television images, as an excess of 'information' with which we do nothing and so which does not become knowledge. To distinguish between recognition and discovery as processes of mediated knowledge is to cut across Corner's (1991) distinction between public information and popular culture. Instead, the distinction depends on the audience's prior state of knowledge (for familiarity and novelty depend on what audiences are or are not already familiar with) and on the epistemological framing of the mediated knowledge (e.g. a genre concerned with education for citizenship, such as the documentary, or with the reproduction of the normative, such as a sitcom), although many genres mix the two. It allows both discovery and recognition to be sources of pleasure; moreover, the former is not necessarily 'better' – we may associate it with learning but also with the voyeurism of the talk show or the imperialism of Carey's (1975) transmission model, as in certain traditional forms of the documentary. Moreover, while recognition is usually understood as the relationship between a particular viewer-in-context and a particularly resonant television scene or event, knowledge is usually understood as making some claim on the general, usually with some normative or mainstreaming connotations (Gerbner *et al.* 1982). Here again, the epistemological claims of a genre and the audience's critical response to these are important for understanding its potential for mediating knowledge.

The media also make an epistemological claim that is potentially transformative of our relations with our everyday context, for they imply that everything is potentially transmittable, that no knowledge, no place or time or aspect of life can escape being included within the vast scope of media representations (even if for practical or commercial reasons it happens not to be so included); everything may be the subject of a documentary or a studio debate. Thus the portrayal of the familiar and the everyday, in addition to any mainstreaming effect it may have through repetition, salience and typicality, gains a normativity precisely through not portraying the unfamiliar. The sitcom family is familiar because it resembles our own (and so may reinforce certain assumptions about family life and offer the pleasures of recognition), but it is also safe, comforting, because it does not challenge us with other images of family life that we now know about, say through a documentary about family life at other times or in other places. The nostalgia with which sitcoms and soaps are imbued derives in part from our intertextual and extratextual knowledge of other ways of living, knowledge which is routinely excluded from these genres as if we were still living in a time when such knowledge was not available. Yet the same viewers, after the sitcom or soap, may watch (indeed, may actively seek out) a documentary, a current affairs discussion or even a talk show in which different and unfamiliar portrayals are now, but once were not, commonplace.

Knowledge, space and time

Writers in the phenomenological tradition have long stressed the importance of analysing the spatio-temporal context of social situations and relationships (Goffman 1974; Meyrowitz 1985; see Drotner 1994 on the legacy of Schutz's work; most recently, Giddens 1984 discusses 'time-space distanciation'). As Drotner notes, 'mass communication is of course precisely defined (among other

aspects) by its dislocation of such time–space relations’ (Drotner 1994: 351). Goffman’s argument that different social settings arrange time and space differently (Jary 1991) is useful for analysing the significance of the media in portraying images of life beyond, as well as within, the viewer’s immediate locale. We may then draw out the ways in which different media forms provide the technical underpinning for new kinds of social settings which position audiences in new relations to absent others, transforming the kinds of knowledge which may be (re)produced in these settings as a consequence.¹⁰ In a similar vein, Thompson develops Horton and Wohl’s (1956) concept of para-social interaction in his discussion of ‘mediated quasi-interaction’, which, despite being monological and non-reciprocal, is still interaction in the sense that ‘it creates a certain kind of social situation in which individuals are linked together in a process of communication and symbolic exchange’ (Thompson 1994: 36); as a consequence, the media may be said to have altered ‘the interaction mix’ of social life (*ibid.*: 37). This more phenomenological analysis may productively develop the somewhat ill-defined terms of ‘context’ or ‘embedding’ which are current in audience ethnography and which are central to cultural studies (Grossberg 1994).

Once symbolic forms gain extended availability across time and space the traditional boundary between public and private may be transformed; hence ‘the private domestic setting – has become a principal site of mediated publicness’ (Thompson 1994: 243). As Urry points out, this increased availability to audiences of certain kinds of information or knowledge may be directly counter to the desires of specific social groups, for television in particular has ‘made all backstages public property and hence served to undermine such a demarcation’ (Urry 1991: 171). Thus, in direct opposition to the emergence during modernity of specialized systems of knowledge, the media open up the possibility of the ‘desequestration of experience’ (Thompson 1994: 227), revealing portayals of experience to which people would not otherwise have access in their day-to-day lives: ‘the media produce a continuous intermingling of different forms of experience, an intermingling that makes the day-to-day lives of most individuals today quite different from the lives of previous generations’ (*ibid.*: 227). Problematically for the concept of space–time distanciation, this sequestration to which the media provides a counterforce may occur close to home (e.g. the prison, Westminster, etc. may be within one’s locale but entirely inaccessible to the laity).¹¹ Thus the media offer an alternative, delocalized agenda of issues and values, and they open up the possibility of what Thompson calls a despatialized commonality, an imagined community based on shared knowledge without a shared locale.¹² Even more than everyday experience, mediated experience or knowledge requires precisely the active process of re-embedding in local contexts that audience researchers have been exploring in recent years, but it is also a process which may transform viewers’ experience and understanding of the local.

In analysing the social consequences of time–space distanciation, Giddens (1984) suggests that despite, or even because of, the increased availability of information individuals are faced with increased risk, coming under pressure to make decisions in situations of uncertainty rather than in the context of adequate knowledge. This creates the burden of endlessly seeking further knowledge, creating an informational dependency which the media are only too

happy to address, some might say exploit. Particularly in the domain of identity politics, it also opens up the possibility of ever greater experimentation or vulnerability. The process of re-embedding or recontextualizing knowledge about absent or other kinds of experience may be a creative – or, more pessimistically, a manipulable – one, allowing both opportunities and dangers for the individual not hitherto possible or legitimate. Thompson sees this positively as ‘a major new arena [which] has been created for the process of self-fashioning’ (Thompson 1994: 43). Reception theory, more neutrally, has long been aware of this; Iser notes that ‘as the reader passes through the various perspectives offered by the text, and relates the different views and patterns to one another, he sets the work in motion, *and so sets himself in motion too*’ (Iser 1980: 106; emphasis mine). Baudrillard (1988) and Habermas (1987), among others, are far more pessimistic about the possibilities for the self/lifeworld escaping from the system world.

Mediated and non-mediated knowledge

The question of self-fashioning, or the active appropriation of mediated meanings, brings us back to the issue of the active or knowing audience, which, as I suggested at the outset, has sometimes appeared to displace the question of mediated knowledge. While the popularity of the active audience concept has multiple justifications (Livingstone 1993), it has tended to set up an opposition between text and reader in which the relationship is one of struggle rather than mutual interaction over time. In the present context it is particularly relevant to note that audience-reception theory appears to assume that viewers’ interpretative resources (i.e. knowledge and ways of knowing) are constructed entirely independently of the media and, moreover, also used by people for understanding their non-mediated everyday experience. This opposition between mediated and non-mediated knowledge lies implicit beneath discussions of the possible interpretations and effects of media representations, especially in arguments about the role of prior experience and the extent to which prior knowledge or interest may reconstrue media representations and so undermine media effects (Philo 1993).¹³ Rather, as Thompson has noted, we must ‘put aside the intuitively plausible idea that communication media serve to transmit information and symbolic content to individuals whose relations to others remain fundamentally unchanged’ (Thompson 1990: 4). To take another example, while expressing concerns that audience research is subordinating media questions to questions of everyday discourses, Schroeder agrees that ‘individuals have no identity as simple receivers of such [media] products’ (Schroeder 1994: 340), for ‘individuals/subjects precede the media products they consume: they and their cultural repertoires have been formed by multiple discourse (interpretive communities?) throughout their lives’ (*ibid.*: 340). Yet individuals are surely born into media cultures just as they are born into a particular linguistic environment (and a separation between culture and media is hard to sustain). Media cultures provide not only interpretative frameworks, but also sources of pleasure and resources for identity-formation which ensure that individuals certainly have a complex identity of which part includes their participatory relations with particular media forms. The strength of arguments about the transformative potential of time-space distancing (as brought about

in part by the mass media) is that it allows us to avoid the assumption of a confrontation or opposition between 'lay knowledge and media knowledge by suggesting that we conceptualize people as primarily located in particular time-space relations but with access via the media (and other means) to others. Furthermore, this access to non-physically present experiences and relations may transform the construction of those experiences and relations which are directly available in one's locale. The focus on interaction and process prevents us posing chicken-and-egg questions about which comes first.¹⁴

As was suggested earlier, ways of knowing made salient by the media may be as significant as – if not more so than – the nature of the knowledge promoted or reinforced by the media. This demands an analysis of how different media genres, forms or channels establish different communicative relations, or different mediated social settings, between text and reader. Again, reception does not just involve a negotiation between media contents and prior interpretative frameworks. Rather, part of becoming a knowledgeable and experienced viewer involves learning media-specific and genre-specific interpretative skills – frameworks of interpretation, modes of involvement, expectations of events, narrative structures (Livingstone 1998a). Allen (1985) argued that soap opera fans make more 'paradigmatic' readings of the genre which focus on the play of possibilities among characters involved in specific events, while non-fans, often including media critics, make 'syntagmatic' readings which focus on the generally repetitive sequencing of events and the absence of conclusions. Similarly, audience discussion fans construe the genre differently from non-fans, valuing the conjunction of contributions from diverse lay publics, seeing these debates as of social value, and relishing the confrontation of elite experts and ordinary people, while non-fans are more concerned about whether the debates are emotional, ill expressed, include non-normative views or 'fail' to reach a consensual conclusion (Livingstone and Lunt 1994). New forms of interaction, mediated or not, require the emergence of new forms of interactional competences; mediated interaction is a skilled achievement on the part of the viewer as well as the text. Moreover, such cultural and media 'literacy' may provide a resource of greater applicability than just to the media, since our interpretative resources do not stay in neat compartments.¹⁵

Implications for audience-reception research

I have argued that a focus on time-space relations in late modernity provides a useful framework for refocusing some of the ways in which audience researchers have considered the problem of mediated knowledge and contextual embedding. In so doing, I have suggested that we abandon certain dichotomies which have structured the field – transmission v. ritual models of communication, public information v. popular culture approaches to study, learning v. pleasure, and mediated knowledge v. personal knowledge. The advantage for audience-reception research is that time-space distancing offers an audience-centred framework and so fits the now widespread recognition that audiences crucially mediate media knowledge processes (or that encoding and decoding are both necessary parts of the whole, or that apparently micro-processes of reception are necessary to macro-processes in the circulation of knowledge; Livingstone

1993). Specifically, both time and space (and the power to access otherwise sequestered domains) are measured in terms of distance from the audience, the knowing subject, and consequently, the familiar and the unfamiliar are defined according to the prior knowledge of the audience.¹⁶ The analysis of different mediated knowledge processes then follows from this distance from the audience. For the familiar, media research has argued that the key processes are those of recognition, validation and mainstreaming; for the novel, media research has argued that the key processes are those of discovery, learning and surveillance. Finally, for both physically absent and physically present events, the dimension of time-space distancing foregrounds the means of coming to know (whether through face-to-face or mediated interactions) rather than the possession (or presumed absence) of knowledge. The case of the audience discussion programme, used as an example of emerging media genres which transform or challenge traditional formats for mediating knowledge, has been valuable in illustrating these points, for it is a genre which places the audience, and the audiences' knowledge and ways of knowing, centre stage, and it combines the recognition of the familiar with the discovery of the new. Most importantly, it problematizes the epistemology of media representations, showing how increasingly critical viewers may negotiate, and gain pleasure from negotiating, the 'rules' by which knowledge is mediated.

This interactional view of audience reception refocuses reception analysis on the ways in which people stand in relationship to each other, rather than as a thing (the audience, which stands in a certain relation to that other thing, the media) of which people may or may not be a member and whose peculiar ways we need to discover (cf. critiques of audience reception research by Ang (1990) and Allor (1988), among others). Our analysis of audience discussion programmes set out to discover what kind of relationships were established among people as an audience for different television genres – were viewers acting as citizens or as consumers, in what ways were they engaged, critical, mindless or responsive to the diverse modes of address in this genre? Most particularly, we wanted to consider the notion of the relationship between text and viewer as one concerned with 'publicness', with acting as a public or with communicating as part of a public. The current debate on Habermas's (1969) theory of the public sphere framed our concerns well (Curran 1991; Garnham 1990), since the question for Habermas was not what the public is, what it thinks, how it acts and what influences it, but, rather, in what ways people in their everyday activities constitute a public, what forms of communication are appropriate for a public sphere and what discursive or institutional threats it faces. More generally, I suggest that audience research should chart the possibilities and problems for communication or relations among people, insofar as these are undermined or facilitated, managed or reconstituted by the media, rather than ask about the various reifications of the audience, the public or the market. Our understanding of mediated knowledge surely depends on our understanding of the communicative relationships established among people, and these include those supported or managed by the media.

Notes

- 1 Questions of mediated knowledge have received less attention in recent research than questions of audience knowledge or social positioning (i.e. 'How do knowing audiences approach texts?' rather than 'What knowledge do texts convey to audiences?'), and questions of the pleasures and the practices associated with media consumption (Livingstone 1998a; Silverstone 1994).
- 2 By epistemology I mean to refer broadly to a set of questions concerning what can be known, ways of knowing, criteria and rules for establishing and legitimating relations between evidence and conclusions, frameworks to guide the construction and application of knowledge, and so forth.
- 3 We should be careful, however, when asking how changes in media forms raise new questions about communication and knowledge not to fall into a technological determinism which assumes simply that social change follows technological change; instead, we should also ask what is it about certain social and cultural formations that some technologies develop and are used in certain ways and not others.
- 4 Certainly, our research suggested that this epistemological negotiation has implications for the reception of other genres; for example, while some viewers complained that a documentary develops its arguments more carefully, uses representative examples and gives experts more time to express their expertise, others considered that the few examples in a documentary are of more dubious representativeness than the multiple voices of the studio audience, that the experts often fail to say anything of significance and that a documentary is more easily biased than a discussion programme (Livingstone and Lunt 1994).
- 5 The agenda for audience research has, over the past fifteen years or so, successfully moved from problematic assumptions about fixed and given textual meanings, passive and vulnerable audiences, and the homogeneous mass 'audience'. In so doing, its most significant achievement has been to make visible an audience which was hitherto devalued, marginalized and presumed about (Livingstone 1998b).
- 6 The role of media institutions is unclear on this view and may be too easily reduced to a kind of functionalist analysis whereby knowledge circulates through the media in order to provide for the ritual needs of the community of receivers; can there, for instance, be dysfunctional, voyeuristic or harmful rituals?
- 7 An example would be the question from cultivation research of whether the statistical patterning of 'television reality' (e.g. overrepresentations of the police force as an adult occupation) affects knowledge of such statistical patterning in real life (overestimation of the number of police officers) or whether it conveys a second-order symbolic message (society values law and order). While the second hypothesis has generally been regarded as both more plausible and more interesting (as in the many content analyses of television's 'symbolic annihilation' of women, where the supposed message is not that there are more men in the world but that men are more important), it has proved easier to support the former empirically than the latter (Hawkins and Pingree 1983).
- 8 In order to contrast audience knowledge or experience with mediated knowledge, researchers tend to posit an implausible opposition between the two. For example, Philo (1993) argues that personal experience of the miners'

- strike – presumably entirely unmediated – acts as a counterforce against the influence of media representations of the strike, without either a processual view of the construction of social reality from multiple sources or a means of analysing interpretations when personal experience accords with the media representation. Morgenstern (1992) notes with some irony that audience researchers assert the power of audiences to undermine media representations when audiences express counternormative positions, while asserting the power of the media when audiences express normative positions; as she says, the test is one not of the strength of mediated knowledge but of whether the audience espouses an implicit left-wing theory.
- 9 Of course, books have traditionally provided a source of knowledge of that which is distant from us in space or time, but such knowledge differs from mass-mediated knowledge in key ways, being circulated among a smaller audience in a relatively ad hoc rather than common manner, and being subject to relatively little institutional management. Audiences for mediated knowledge may generally assume that theirs is a shared experience, and this facilitates interpersonal relations among audiences as well as relations between audiences and media.
 - 10 See Giddens's (1984) emphasis on the transformative potential resulting from the 'stretching' of social relations over time and space, so that face-to-face interaction with others in a shared locale is increasingly supplemented by interaction with others who are physically absent.
 - 11 For example, the issue of televising the activities of the Houses of Parliament in Britain involved questions both of what the public should know and of whether the desequestration of parliamentary debate would itself be transformative of that debate. Such desequestration results in conjunctions which have hitherto been segregated by the media; for example, in the audience discussion programme a homeless woman may have an argument with, and even get the better of, a government minister for housing and this may alter the public regard in which both parties are held.
 - 12 By watching an audience discussion programme of a drama documentary the teenager suffering from anorexia, the mother of a drink-driving victim, the gay man who cannot tell his parents may all discover that they are not alone, that others exist in their position who share their experiences.
 - 13 Empirical research tends in any case to confuse neat theoretical distinctions. For example, in their recent study of women viewing violence Schlesinger *et al.* (1992) show substantial differences in the viewing of violent images between women with and without personal experience of violence. But what knowledge was at stake? Largely irrespective of prior experience, most of the viewers were reasonably cynical about the police and the workings of law-and-order agencies; most were fairly familiar with the nature of the violent episodes portrayed (in the sense that they claimed not to have learnt much, although they were committed to the idea that others would learn about violence by seeing such images and so believed an educational value for others was at stake). The differences lay more in the consequences of being reminded of their common knowledge – those with prior experience viewed the scenes with greater emotion, with greater empathy, with a clearer ability to predict narrative developments, with a greater sense of fear for themselves and with a greater cynicism about men as perpetrators of violence. There are

- differences, then, in the process of relating to the world and the positioning of oneself within it, but not necessarily in information about that world, for a realm of shared representations is already available to women concerning the continued threat to themselves of violence from men and this forms part of the context within which they themselves encounter their personal experiences.
- 14 The theory of media-systems dependency (Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur 1976) raises an interesting exception, namely the question of how audiences respond when they become dependent on the media for knowledge which is critically unavailable or inaccessible within their immediate locale, as in times of crisis.
 - 15 Watkins (1988) suggests that, while 'light' viewers tend to use interpretative frameworks from everyday life to retell a television narrative, 'heavy' viewers tend to reverse this, being more likely to use mediated frameworks to retell events from everyday life.
 - 16 As the media themselves are part of the immediate locale of the audience, past media experiences become part of the familiar (although they are experienced via mediated rather than face-to-face interaction). 'Prior knowledge' (frequently shown to make a difference to media reception (Livingstone 1998a; Philo 1993; Schlesinger *et al.* 1992) may thus be either mediated or directly experienced by viewers and cannot be simply contrasted with new mediated representations – the president of the United States is not available to us directly, but, like J.R. Ewing, he is no longer unfamiliar to us (indeed, viewers often are unclear about the source of their information; Lewis 1991).

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