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Relationships between media and audiences:
Prospects for audience reception studies¹

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The problems and possibilities for audience research

This paper sets out to ask 'what next' for audience research. 'Audience reception analysis', 'reception studies' or 'audience ethnography' emerged and developed, with considerable success, from a convergence of hitherto opposed research traditions during the 1980s (Corner, 1991; Livingstone, 1995). Audience studies currently face a paradox in which many interesting papers, especially those reporting empirical observations, are being published, while simultaneously there exists a body of criticisms which have largely gone unanswered. This then seems an appropriate moment to consider the achievements, problems and future direction of audience reception studies.

In brief, I will argue that the construction of a research 'canon' has generated this apparent paradox. The success of the canon has undoubtedly stimulated a range of interesting and innovative empirical studies. Yet it has also provided a legitimacy which permits researchers to bypass the criticisms by providing a template for audience research which does not require any more formalised theorisation or research agenda. Thus, the critiques go unanswered partly because the field's failings can neither be set against its aims or used to develop theory further. Yet by going beyond the canon, audience research can better address the critiques, thereby opening up audience studies to a more diverse set of questions which would move research towards a more explicit theory of audiences and hence towards more productive relations between audience studies and other domains of media and communications.

The convergence of multiple research traditions

Audience reception studies focus on the interpretative relation between audience and medium, where this relation is understood within a broadly ethnographic context. It would be inappropriate to identify any unitary origin for reception studies, and even dating their starting point depends on how one identifies the key precedents (Allor, 1988; Jensen and Rosengren, 1990). I would identify the following six trajectories towards reception studies which converged during the late 1970s as part of a broader movement towards interdisciplinarity in the social sciences. Each of these six routes may be characterised in brief by the advocacy of a central argument or core concept. One of these focused on the processes of producing and reproducing culture. Thus when noting in 1980 the beginning of 'a new and exciting phase in so-called audience research' (p.131), Hall introduced the paired concepts of *encoding* and *decoding* to integrate text and audience studies. Hall welcomed the opportunity for cultural studies to examine empirically how 'the degrees of "understanding" and "misunderstanding" in the communicative exchange -- depend on the degrees of symmetry/asymmetry (relations of equivalence) established between the positions of the "personifications", encoder/producer and decoder/receiver' (1980, p.131).

Simultaneously, researchers in a domain traditionally opposed to cultural studies, that of uses and gratifications, saw the new focus on audience interpretation as setting the scene for them 'to build the bridge we have been hoping might arise between gratifications studies and cultural studies' (Katz, 1979, p.75). The rationale here was to account for the selective responses of audiences in the face of media excess, with the key concept being the *active audience*. Thus these researchers wanted to open up a broader conception of what audiences might do with texts, in order to allow for the ritual uses of communications as well as the transmission of media contents from producers to audiences (Carey, 1975; see Dayan and Katz, 1992; see also DAYAN and CAREY, THIS VOLUME).

A third route to reception studies drew upon moves within critical mass communications

research to shift attention away from an exclusive focus on the ideological and institutional determinants of media texts towards including a role for a possibly active, but hitherto 'disappearing', audience (Fejes, 1984). This resulted in a focus on the *resistant audience*, as part of the questioning of such hegemonic theories as the dominant ideology thesis (Abercrombie, et al, 1980), the cultural imperialism thesis (Hallin, 1996) and the political economy approach (Murdock, 1989). Some of the strongest and most contested claims for the autonomy of the active audience have been made in rebutting theories of media or cultural hegemony.

A fourth route depended on a broader dismantling of the then dominant structuralist approach to textual analysis (the 'Screen Theory' tradition) as part of the move towards post-structuralism. This occurred both through the Birmingham's School's approach to cultural studies and through the influence of German reception-aesthetics (e.g. Iser, 1980) and American reader-response theory (Suleiman & Crosman, 1980). Eco's theory (1979) of '*the role of the reader*' was crucial to the theorisation of an integrated approach to text and reader. He proposed the 'model reader' as an implicit set of assumptions detectable within the structure of a text which rendered the meaning of the text fundamentally open or unstable, depending on the actual interpretative contribution of 'real readers'. With this conception of the text and reader as mutually defining, literary or high culture theories were applied to the study of popular culture, asking specifically about the relation between model and actual audiences (Allen, 1985; Seiter, 1989; Livingstone, 1995).

Fifthly, feminist approaches to popular culture allowed for the reconsideration of the often vilified (i.e. feminised) role of the popular culture audience within cultural theory. This resulted in a reconsideration of the mapping of good and bad, 'masculine' and 'feminine' genres (e.g. news versus soap opera) and cognitive and emotional responses onto high and low culture, and offered instead an alternative set of valuations which mapped primarily onto active and passive audiences, critical and normative readings and open and closed texts (Ang, 1985; Radway, 1984; Drotner, 1992). The emphasis on the *marginalised audience*, then, provided a focus for arguments about reevaluating or giving voice to those hitherto invisible to normative theory.

While the convergence of these five positions provided the major impetus behind reception studies during the 1980s, the recent 'ethnographic turn', which shifts the focus away from the moment of textual interpretation and towards the contextualisation of that moment, draws into the frame a sixth tradition. This involves the detailed analysis of the *culture of the everyday*, stressing the importance of 'thick description' as providing a grounding for theory, together with an analysis of the ritual aspects of culture and communication (Carey, 1975) and the practices by which meanings are re/produced in daily life (de Certeau, 1984).

The achievements of audience reception studies

We are now in a position to assess the flurry of research activity which followed this convergence of traditions from the late 1970s through to the early 1990s. For a time this seemed some of the most exciting and most interdisciplinary work in media and communications research, and at a number of international conferences, reception studies were what people talked about. The excitement derived not only from the simultaneous convergence on (apparently) common arguments by very different theoretical traditions, but also from the sense that such convergence might open the way to transcending the metatheoretical, epistemological and political differences on which these traditions rest. In other words, audience reception research provided a moment for cultural and media

scholars to reconsider the enduring questions of the field -- the relation between humanities and social scientific approaches, between macro and micro theories, between administrative and critical communications, and so forth (Jensen and Rosengren, 1990; Carey 1975, Hall, 1989; Livingstone, 1995).

To open up a debate is easier than to resolve it, and disagreement remains over whether the hopes for a broader theoretical convergence across diverse traditions in media research has been as successful as the body of empirical audience reception studies generated in the attempt (Curran, 1990). It is not even clear whether such convergence is possible or desirable at all (Ang, 1990a; Grossberg, 1994), but this is a longer debate than I have space to consider here. However, the body of empirical studies on audience reception have been influential, stimulating and informative. We may fairly conclude that the original agenda for audience research has been successful, although the arguments motivating this agenda need to be kept alive in case of a backlash against the audience research. Such successes may be measured both intellectually and pragmatically.

Intellectually, all six traditions identified above have benefitted significantly from their engagement with a convergent approach to audience reception studies, resulting in the generation of new and productive lines of research. While production, text and context analyses have frequently made implicit assumptions about the audience, only recently has it been realised that audiences may not fit these assumptions and that validity of many media theories depends on empirical audience research currently being or yet to be conducted. Thus most importantly, reception studies have made *visible* an audience which has hitherto been devalued, marginalised and presumed about in policy and theory. As Allor (1988) comments, whichever social theory we draw upon, the concept of the audience represents a theoretical pivot around which key debates concerning individual and society, agency and structure, voluntarism and determinism, oscillate.

In addition to this metatheoretical claim concerning the importance of investigating audiences empirically, reception studies have advanced media theory through a series of arguments which contrast sharply with previous approaches. Thus, media and communications research has moved on, irreversibly, from the assumption that media texts have fixed and given meanings to be identified by elite analysts, that media influence works through the linear transmission of meaning to a passive audience, that audiences are a homogenous, uncritical mass, or that high culture differs qualitatively in obvious and uncontentious ways from popular culture. Rather, it is established that audiences are plural in their decodings, that their cultural context matters, and that they often disagree with textual analyses. Researchers are sensitised to the ways in which the haphazard and contingent details of people's daily lives provide the context in which media are engaged with and responded to, and, moreover, to the argument that neglecting the 'culture of everyday life' or the 'politics of the living room' results in a gender-bias which underestimates the conditions of women's lives. Key earlier traditions are being rethought, particularly those of the problematic effects tradition (given the recognition of the active processes of text interpretation by audiences), and uses and gratifications theory (given the task of reconstructing a more social conception of audience 'need' or pleasure). The supposed activity and resistance of the audience is widely cited as refuting theories of media hegemony or dominant ideology (Abercrombie, Hill, & Turner, 1980; Hall, 1989), and further critical empirical work on audiences is urged by social theorists (Thompson, 1990).

Pragmatically, this new visibility of the audience has implications for diverse aspects of media research. Researchers working a number of fields of media and cultural studies have shifted to include audience studies within their scope. Research proposals to examine media production or texts are increasingly likely to include an audience study. Reviewers for

scholarly journals feel justified in questioning the validity of text or production studies which do not include the likely or actual role of the audience. The increased prominence of audience studies within media studies textbooks testifies to the established status of audience research. To take one recent example, in *Approaches to Media, A reader*, Boyd-Barrett (1995) suggests that, 'if obliged to define a single distinguishing feature of media study over the past 15 years many scholars would focus on new approaches to audience or 'reception' analysis' (p.498).

Yet having established its success, and so secured a place in the textbooks (Corner, 1995; Curran, et al., 1996; Moores, 1993; Morley, 1992; Silverstone, 1994), this new research field offers rather little idea of where to go next beyond generating more of the same. Certainly more empirical research on audiences is needed, but not without a clearer analytic framework to justify it than has yet been developed. I suggest that an agenda is partly lacking because much audience research was developed as a valuable polemic to reorient a problematic field. In other words, it looked backwards -- to argue against, and define itself against, the various previously popular positions identified above -- rather than forwards in its ambitions. Such a critical position was particularly adopted by cultural studies approaches to audiences, but also holds for uses and gratifications and effects research. However, such polemic forms of the argument may now become reified and unqualified, providing legitimation rather than justification for proceeding further.

The construction of a research canon

Whether audience research is assessed intellectually or in terms of research practice, a related question arises. Intellectually, we may ask whether the six traditions hold together: are they sufficiently convergent in their approach to audiences that they can generate an emergent phenomenon which we may term 'audience theory' which contributes to media and communications research over and above the contributions of the diverse traditions which feed into it? More pragmatically, we may ask where such audience research is taking us and why, if it is so confident of its successes, has it been neglectful in rebutting its critics? While welcoming the fact that researchers have decided to include audiences where previously they were ignored, I suspect such research is often envisaged with little idea of what might result, how it might be useful, or even, how to do it. What questions are being asked of focus group discussions or ethnographic interviews, and how exactly is audience research to be interfaced with other kinds of research?

I would identify the particular form of success, namely the construction of a research canon, as itself now posing a central problem for audience studies. By canon, I mean a small set of often-repeated examples of audience studies which are used both to justify the research enterprise -- in which they have so far been successful -- and, implicitly or explicitly, to direct it; this is more problematic in the absence of a clear set of guiding questions or arguments. It is probably not coincidental that some of the excitement has now worn off from empirical audience reception studies just as their success has resulted in entering the textbooks (Boyd-Barrett & Newbold, 1995; Curran & Gurevitch, 1991; Curran, Morley, & Walkerdine, 1996; Downing, Mohammadi & Sreberny-Mohammadi, 1990; McQuail, 1994; Nightingale, 1996; Price, 1993). As a secondary-source or canonical account of the field emerges, a narrative is constructed which, as is typical of narratives, tells a story of progress towards enlightenment and does so via the construction of heroes and villains.

To simplify just a little, it would seem that while once upon a time, audiences were studied by reductionist, quantitative positivists, this is no longer true, and that media and cultural studies now have their own exciting account of audiences (see, for example, the early chapters of Morley, 1980, and Allen, 1985), although Curran (1990) offers an alternative,

revisionist, account. Such a narrativisation of the field, while rhetorically powerful in raising the visibility of a research domain, is also proving restrictive for audience researchers, for the clash of diverse positions is being replaced by an institutionalised orthodoxy which frames and contains the new audience studies. The canon allows researchers to reproduce a successful research strategy without necessarily engaging with either the intellectual origins of the canon or the debates with, alternatives to or criticisms of the canon.

In addition to the problems of a canon *per se*, there are also the problems inherent in the construction of one particular canon over another. The research canon which has emerged in audience studies most typically centres on Morley's *Nationwide Audience* study (1980), Radway's *Reading the Romance* (1984) and Ang's *Watching Dallas* (1985), with some variants (see, for example, Lewis's discussion of 'the new audience research', 1991, Silverstone's review of 'recent audience research', Corner's overview of 'new audience studies', 1991, and Boyd-Barratt and Newbold's, 1995, and Nightingale's, 1996, exemplar case studies). While this familiar litany of studies is undoubtedly important and influential and has played a vital role in the field's 'successes' identified above, it is also parochial, not definitive, and so underplays the value of the actual diversity of audience reception studies currently being conducted.²

In addition to the identification of heroes and villains (these latter include that stereotyped outgroup of straw people -- the hypodermic effects theorist, the social psychologist, the manipulative broadcaster, the elitist text analyst), the construction of a standard narrative tends to tell, retrospectively, a linear intellectual history which tends to underplay certain theoretical influences. It is the route to audience reception via ideology critique (and as a rejection of the effects and uses and gratifications approaches) which is now most prominently retold, with the 'new audience research' seen as stemming from the work of the Birmingham School and especially from the important, but not all important, encoding/decoding paper (see, for example, the accounts in Moores, 1993, Price, 1993, and Abercrombie, 1996; see also the argument for 'decentering Birmingham' in Wright, 1996). Yet literary theory also, particularly through the reception-aesthetics of European scholars, provided an important theoretical input during the 1970s and 80s. Consequently, the textuality of media products is more easily underestimated and the value of literary-type analyses as a complement to the more frequent discursive ones may be forgotten. Similarly, the feminist origins of audience research are being written out, with the danger that feminist audience studies become ghettoised rather than fully integrated with other approaches (Drotner, 1992). Yet for a number of researchers, it was the confrontation between feminist theory and 'real' women that provided the primary focus, hence their concern with the soap opera and romance (Ang, 1985; Hobson, 1982; Radway, 1984).

A single narrative makes it difficult to attend to the intellectual relations among feminism, reception theory, and ideology theories, which remain in need of further elaboration. For example, audience research faces significant issues concerning the relations between marginal and dominant groups, between textual structures and audience understandings, between local knowledge and ideological processes, for all of which a diversity of theory is

²Those included in the canon may not wish to be incorporated in this manner, and there is an irony in critical audience researchers themselves constituting something so conventional, and now conventionally deconstructed, as a canon.

essential. While the limitations of the effects tradition provided another motivation for reception studies, how media research should now reframe the question of effects still requires attention (Livingstone, 1996). It also seems that uses and gratifications research is proceeding separately from the reception tradition with which it had seemed momentarily to converge; the significance of psychological motivations for engaging with media remains neglected by culturalist approaches in comparison with their treatment of sociocultural factors. As the strength and excitement of the argument for theoretical convergence lay in its emphasis on the confrontation of multiple positions, rather than the avoidance or smoothing over of theoretical difference, the reduction of these through a canonical retelling of the field's history will neglect the richness from which new vitality can grow.

Towards a theory of the audience

Both the canonization of and growing doubts concerning audience reception research may be explained by the observation that for cultural studies particularly, audience reception served merely as a convenient arena within which to play out a series of critical theoretical problems regarding the relations among texts, ideology and social determinations, and so once these were resolved (or not), the field could be left alone once more. This may not be unproblematic for cultural studies either. As Press (1996) notes, 'we in cultural audience studies are at a crossroads...we are quickly reaching the limits of what have over the last twenty years become our comfortable and customary preoccupations' (p.2). The interdisciplinary convergence which proved so productive for audience research has, Press suggests, proved problematic for cultural studies by detracting from the clear focus in which 'audience' was a metaphor for critical, political actors; by implication, 'audience' was never intended to be as all-encompassing as it subsequently became. Moreover, while cultural studies was mainly concerned with one of the research paths leading to reception studies, in making this popular, it contributed to the neglect of other paths. Cultural studies neither set an agenda for audience reception studies nor addressed the critiques levelled at it, and nor did it set out to do so. Rather, the point of empirical research was to establish the possibility of a diversity of readings: this showed both how elite and popular readings differed, and how the divergences among audiences themselves could be located in terms of contextual categories in order to address arguments about hegemonic position and the possibilities of resistance.

Of course, differences were found: one of the costs of adopting an empirical approach is that, unlike the ideal theorising of implied readers, empirical observations are always subject to variation. Unless interviewees are expected to speak in identical voices, observable differences are inevitable. The problem for audience research is to determine their significance -- which differences reflect idiosyncratic factors and which merit explanation? Many of the key theoretical issues facing audience research concern the scale of these differences -- for example, are audiences increasingly fragmented or homogeneous, are readings primarily normative or resistant, how far do actual viewing practices (e.g. zipping and zapping) undermine the textual and generic structuring of readings? Clearly it becomes important to relocate these findings of difference within a broader theoretical context.

Cobley (1994) suggests that we need 'a critical recapitulation of audience theory' (p.685), while Jensen and Rosengren (1990) question the expectations of 'theory' as well as of 'audience'. Questions about audience theory may be grouped into two categories. The first asks *how* to do audience research or, how it can be improved, to ensure that it adds up to something, whether or not we term this 'audience theory'. The second asks *why* we need a theory of audiences or, to put it differently, what a theory of audiences will contribute to research in media and communications more generally. My approach in the remainder of this paper will be to make a start on the former category of questions, with the aim that if we

address the criticisms levelled at current audience research, a more formal account of the assumptions, findings and contribution of this research should result. Building on the existing strengths of audience research should also be productive for the broader field of media and communications, by generating an agenda which answers the 'why' question as well as the 'how'. In other words, we need a theory which offers an agenda which in turn not only directs audience research but also ensures that the outcome of such research will serve to connect audience research with production/texts/context research as firmly as actual audiences are inevitably interrelated with actual production/texts/context. Arguably, an agenda would not be needed if a productive diversity of research was evident. An agenda may seem too programmatic, even autocratic. Yet while the diversity of research is potentially productive, the growing uncertainty over the aims of audience reception research suggests that a laissez-faire approach is no longer constructive.

A new research domain with high visibility inevitably, and rightly, attracts critical commentary. I have already suggested that the strength of support for the canon has resulted in relatively little attention being given to resolving the accumulating body of critique. Yet the active audience, negotiation of meaning, oppositional subcultures, resistance, even the notion of audience itself have all become subject to critique (Ang, 1989; Schiller, 1992; Seaman, 1992; Seiter, Borchers, Kreutzner, & Warth, 1989; Livingstone, 1995). The nature of the criticisms can, however, be regarded constructively as pointing up the key claims and concerns of audience reception studies so that a response to critics is simultaneously a development of audience theory. We can summarise the kinds of critique levelled at reception studies as broadly concerning the following: (1) the claim for and limits of audience activity; (2) the power of texts to determine readings; (3) the problem of contextualization (or the tendency towards media-centrism); (4) whether diversity in readings makes a 'real' difference; (5) the validity of the concept of audience itself; (6) the relation between micro and macro levels of media theory; (7) audience research methods and the politics of research. Clearly these concerns encompass the core elements of audience theory.

Balancing texts and readers in mutual interaction

One significant critique of the field has questioned the extent to which audiences are free to interpret texts in different ways. Where once the audience was thought in danger of disappearing (Fejes, 1984), it is now the text which is in danger. Hence, Blumler et al (1985) are concerned with excessive or 'vulgar gratificationism', Fiske (1989) coined the much-attacked phrase of 'semiotic democracy', Corner (1995) suggests that in much 'active audience' research, the text tends to get lost altogether, and Ang (1994) questions the focus on divergences in interpretation in relation to the exclusion of observed commonalities.

In contradiction with this, there is also concern that the interactive emphasis of the text-reader metaphor tends to collapse back into a claim for textual determination, reducing back to a transmission model of communication (Carey, 1975). The debate over the concepts of preferred and aberrant readings (Allor, 1988; Ang, 1994; Lewis, 1991) provides a focus for this conceptual struggle, with Hall retaining a claim for a significant measure of textual determination against Lewis's suggestion that the preferred reading is simply what the majority of the audience supposes it to be (Hall, 1994).

Clearly the concept of the preferred reading was misnamed, being neither the audience's reading nor necessarily preferred by them. Nonetheless the concept itself cannot be discarded without losing the interactionist focus on audiences *in relation to* texts (and to the motivations behind texts). Concepts such as implied reader or model reader -- the idealised concepts of the reader as structured into the text, which encourage and legitimate certain

actual readings over others -- may be preferable. It is sometimes suggested that as preferred readings or model readers can only be identified via analysis of actual audience responses such concepts should be dropped in favour of reception analysis alone. But this is unconvincing, for such arguments tend not to be made either in relation to the interpretation of audience responses as texts themselves or to eliminate the conduct of textual analyses in domains other than audience analysis. If we can analyse texts and audiences, we can analyse the relation between them. As suggested earlier, Eco's attempt to specify in detail the mutual assumptions which link encoding and decoding is more helpful in this respect than the sketchy encoding/decoding model.

The contradiction between the first two critiques suggests that the balance between text and audience, while problematic, must remain central to audience theory. Why should such apparently simple balances and contextualizations prove difficult for audience reception and ethnographic research? I suggest that the establishment of a research canon tends to undermine the complexity which is central to the vitality of a field. We need to move beyond the canon to recognise, and develop further, the *variety* of work which has been and will be conducted by audience researchers. Such variety is needed to remedy the present position of incomplete and unsystematic investigation. For example, why is there little or no research on male soap viewers, despite the popularity of arguments about gendered viewing of this genre? Why has there been an overly narrow focus on subset of genres (soaps and news) when surely a survey of less well known work on other genres (e.g. sitcoms, game shows, access programmes) would produce a richer understanding of the diversity or otherwise of viewers' engagement with broadcast media. Why is there so much on adult viewers but so little on children? Or on fans but not on the boredom of viewing? Or on television but not on other media? I could go on.

The question of audience freedoms (or social rather than textual determinations) can only be addressed through a greater diversity of research findings, and a greater cross-referencing of research findings, in order to come at the text-reader interface in systematically varied ways. However, further variety is unproductive unless research is also more integrative in orientation, addressing rather than underplaying the inconsistencies, trends and contradictions across research studies. For example, despite the sizeable body of work on the decoding of news (Cumberbatch et al, 1986; Gamson, 1992; Graber, 1988; Jordin & Brunt, 1988; Lewis, 1991; Morley, 1980; Philo, 1993), there has been little attempt to integrate these, address empirical contradictions, identify unfinished leads, and so forth. This is partly because findings are often cited illustratively rather than to ground theory, and each study appears to start again from the beginning. Yet there exist in the research literature many studies whose findings would be more useful if interpreted within a more integrated framework.

From contextualisation to comparative analysis

Thus, the project of audience research depends on detailed empirical answers (the when and where and under what circumstances), perhaps with the guidance of a 'cultural map' (Morley, 1992, p.118). Only then can it move beyond arguing over, or worse still, discovering, whether audiences are sometimes active and othertimes passive or whether they sometimes share experiences and at other times split into subgroups. However, by arguing for greater specificity, I do not mean simply greater contextualisation, especially when this is seen not as resolving specific questions but as providing a blanket answer. Of course, the audience's engagement with media is complexly context-dependent. Moreover, the methodological commitment to ethnographic approaches has proved invaluable to audience studies, for the particular determinants of the complex and situated process of meaning construction cannot be predicted *a priori* (and hence built into a research design),

and consensual or divergent audience readings are often only made accountable when the researcher shares the location of the researched and so can identify the determinants at work.

However, recognising the embeddedness of viewing practices in everyday life results in local contexts of text-reader interaction becoming highly salient. As audience research moves further into the analysis of local, particular contexts, shifting away from specifically media analysis into the general analysis of culture, consumption and everyday life, a new focus on consumption tends to take the place of reception.³ Ironically the very advantage of reception studies -- the interactive link between text, audience and context -- gets lost as a consequence of their success. Our questions become everyone else's questions, and our conclusions are inconclusive. Analysing 'the whole way of life' (Willis, 1990) may be too grand an ambition for audience research, and placing the primary focus on context is inappropriate because audience research requires a contextualised account of something specific -- the relation between people and media. While I do not mean to advocate the kind of media centrism which presumptuously overstates the importance of the media in everyday life, it does seem important to legitimate a space within which some researchers can ask media-centred questions as part of a broader multidisciplinary intellectual endeavour concerned with culture, social change and communicative relations. Such media-centred research may or may not find for the importance of the media in everyday life, although their complete irrelevance is unlikely. But it should offer a clearer analysis of the nature and scope of that importance by exploring how audience research links with the analysis of other social and cultural agencies and institutions (work, politics, family, education, etc.).

There are, then, dangers associated with advocating increased specificity of research studies, for audience research is already losing the wood for the trees. Nor is it clear that a 'cultural map' would help us through the wood. As cultural geographers argue, a map is a cultural construct, constructed to benefit certain groups with certain interests. It is precisely this question of interests which is unclear. Rather, I suggest that the use of comparative analysis, rather than the accumulation of diverse detail, would provide a viable strategy. When arguing for cross-national comparative studies, Blumler et al (1992) claim that 'only comparative research can overcome space- and time-bound limitations on the generalizability of our theories, assumptions, and propositions' (p.3). 'Overcoming' may be too strong, and not even desirable, but an awareness of these limitations is necessary. Comparative studies of audience subgroupings, media genres, historical periods, and so forth would tighten up speculations and focus research. Pragmatically, a comparative focus draws on a greater variety of empirical research than has been in focus hitherto, and though much of this already exists (see the example of television news research above), the rather restrictive canon has obscured this.

More importantly, it is the case that in principle all research is comparative, whether or not this is acknowledged explicitly. To offer an analysis is to make a series of claims about how what is found differs (or resembles) what might have been expected for other times, places, genres or social groups. When such claims remain implicit, it is impossible to check them out or to discover their scope. For example, is it appropriate to assume that Radway's

³We may paraphrase this as asking whether, for today's audience researchers, it matters *what* is on television, or whether researchers are only interested in where, how and why television is viewed? Similarly, one wonders why media content is considered important when media are analysed as a cultural form (e.g. in production or text analyses) but somehow gets dropped when we consider the audience's response.

analysis (1984) of American women romance readers holds for women everywhere, or that Schlesinger et al's (1992) analysis of women viewing violence is not also applicable to men, or that Morley's (1980) analysis of the response to current affairs (in terms of Trade Union participation, traditional labour market positions, etc.) is as relevant to the post-Thatcher period as to the pre-Thatcher one? Claims to generality or specificity may not be made by the original authors, but emerge nonetheless as these works are taken up by others to exemplifying the resistant, or diverse, or unexpected nature of audience reception.

Comparative analysis of audience reception can be organised according to two linked categories, following the emphasis on the dynamic relation between audiences and media texts. First, audience interpretation is structured by textual factors. A variety of concepts may be used to understand this, whether textual openness/closure, preferred readings, generic conventions, naturalising discourses, subject positioning. Second, audience interpretation is structured by (psycho)social factors. These too may be variously understood as, for example, sociodemographic position, cultural capital, interpretive community, contextual discourses, sociocognitive resources, national identity, even psychodynamic forces. However these two facets of the text-reader relation are conceptualized, both textual and social determinations must also be understood in relation to textual and social spaces for openness, contradiction, agency, polysemy, ambiguity, and so forth. It is only from understanding this relation that we can understand the importance of social change, resistance and individuality, in the production and reproduction of meanings in everyday life. Clearly, this dualism reflects the broader structure-agency problem (c.f. Moores' use of Giddens' Structuration theory, 1993; see also Thompson, 1994). Do social formations determine diverse readings or do such readings represent evidence of agency and the escape from determination (Ang, 1994; Silverstone, 1994)? It is inappropriate to argue simply that texts represent structured constraints while audiences find spaces within these to exercise agency, for this leads us down the path of hegemonic forces trying to manipulate free individuals. Rather both text and reader must be understood in terms of structural and agentic factors.

These comparative categories have, with a few exceptions, been regarded as contributing to an analysis of the contemporary. The textual or social determinants operating in the present are assumed to have a wider applicability than an historical or temporally sensitive perspective would support.⁴ Research findings do not necessarily hold true across time, and nor do they simplistically mark a break between now and 'how things used to be'. New media, and new forms and flows of information, raise new questions about the fragmentation of the hitherto mass audience, globalisation of the hitherto national audience, interactivity for the hitherto passive audience, and so forth. But if we assume that a few canonical studies encapsulate the field, we divorce rather than locate research in its time and place, collapsing across differences rather than treating them as informative. In short, the comparative perspective should be extended to include a historical dimension to audience research.

So what? Rethinking the audience

⁴For example, the concerns of, say, Morley's *Nationwide* project may begin to appear dated as Britain becomes no longer so clearly stratified by social class as was traditionally the case and as the trade union movement is significantly weakened by the years of Thatcherism. This is not to argue for the removal of the project from the canon, for it tells us about audiences in the 1970s which may still hold true or which may contrast informatively with contemporary research. But for such an informative prospect, we need a lot more than three or four projects in the 'canon'.

The significance of diverse interpretations has been much questioned in audience studies. This 'so what' question has mainly been raised in relation to the putative link between active audiences and political or ideological processes, for activity has tended to be understood as opposition, subversion or resistance. As has been variously pointed out (Gitlin, 1990; Morgenstern, 1992; Schiller, 1992; Seaman, 1992), one cannot claim that any kind of interpretative activity involves resistance, opposition or subversion, without having a clear test of whether a divergent reading is subversive or normative, of whether it originates primarily in the text or from the viewer, and without having shown how such supposed resistant decodings actually do make a difference politically.

This question of putative micropolitical impacts highlights the importance of adequately contextualizing the text-reader balance within a theory of social action, political participation and identity politics. Here audience research interfaces -- potentially at least -- with other domains of social theory (Murdock, 1989), requiring not only comparative analysis but also the integration of micro and macro level theory (Alexander, Giesen, Munch, & Smelser, 1987). For example, an audience researcher may investigate the participation of listeners in a talk radio show in which the laity are constructed as the public. But it requires a comparison with face-to-face talk (i.e. lay talk in private), and with traditional media debate (i.e. expert talk in public) in order to understand fully the significance of radio talk. Moreover, such analysis needs a more macro framework which draws on theories of the public sphere and of political communication in order to consider how such shows relate to the democratic process (c.f. Livingstone and Lunt, 1994).

The so what question (or, why do audience research?) has been addressed via a traditional and often implicit mapping of the audience onto the micro and the politically or culturally important onto the macro.⁵ Consequently, to justify audience studies, researchers find themselves in the position of needing to show how the micro-level processes of audience reception are of importance for macro-level societal and cultural processes. This argument for the effect of micro on macro -- for want of better terms -- has been strongly advocated both by social psychologists (as part of the social constructionist position) and by cultural studies (via concepts of resistance and subversive reappropriation). As a result, researchers find themselves under pressure to produce findings startling to macro-level theorist (together with hard evidence for simplistically conceived causal links). Unfortunately it may not -- or at least has not in practice -- always been the case that if we 'actually looked at the audience', we would 'be surprised' (indeed, the absence of surprises should also be an interesting finding). In other words, a broader framework for audience research must extend beyond the issue of the politics of representation, of making visible and validating marginalised and resistant voices. For while this has undoubtedly been an important motivation for critically oriented audience researchers, it cannot carry whole weight of audience research.

⁵The emphasis on contextualisation may itself have been intended as a response to the so what question, but also got lost in the micro level of daily routines.

The implications of the active audience are further complicated by the apparent confusion between two positions, the *in principle* argument that audiences' constructive and interpretative practices represent a vital link in the societal circulation and reproduction of meanings and the empirical argument that audiences are in practice unpredictable, diverse or resistant. The first position argues that micro and macro levels of analysis (or, the micro-level lifeworld and the macro-level system, to use Habermas's terms) require an integrated theory of mediated communication. The second position argues that the empirical identification of resistance in decoding significantly challenges that analysis of power which maps power/ideology and powerlessness onto encoding and decoding respectively.⁶ The empirical case for this may be weaker than the claim merits, yet a reversal of the mapping (i.e. simply attributing more power to the audience) is equally untenable.

Emphasising the interaction between text and reader, combined with an integration of micro and macro levels of analysis, offers a response to the attack on the concept of the audience. In brief, this attack is critical of the tendency to adopt the broadcasters' concept of audience (i.e. that used for organising, controlling and profiting from people in everyday contexts; Ang, 1990b) and/or to adopt an overly homogeneous concept of the audience which stimulates artificial questions stemming from a reified object of inquiry (Allor, 1988). While the charge of collusion with exploitative elites is too extreme, there is reasonable doubt over whether it is appropriate to conceptualise people first in their relation to the media (i.e. as an audience) and only then to formulate the research questions about their relation to the other ways in which people may be conceptualised -- as a market, a public, consumers, a nation, a community. Yet each of these terms when considered as an alternative to the audience seems similarly problematic, for each term accesses different debates (about the economy, democracy, desire, identity, etc). As an aside, I would suggest that if Ang's book had been entitled 'Desperately seeking the public', presenting a critique of the public opinion industry, researchers would not have responded by rejecting the concept of the 'public'. Surely the concept of audience also can be separated from the industry which profits from it. The audience concept recognises the historical emergence of audiencehood, the construction of people as spectators of social life, as recipients more than as producers of meaning. To pursue the analogy, I suggest that 'Desperately seeking the market' would be unnecessary, because the market is by definition that measured at point of sale and so readily accessible. Hence, while the public precedes the industry which measures it and the market is constructed by the industry which measures it, the audience is somewhere in between. As a concept, it has the advantage of being primarily defined by neither political nor economic theory, but simply in relation to the media; how audiences then relate to publics or markets becomes an important but distinct question.

⁶There may be less ideological cases of 'resistance' also, as in the market failure of certain products (e.g. the early history of the home computer), showing that perceptions and beliefs have an impact on production and economics.

Thus, rather than asking what they are as individuals or a mass, or what they, as an artificial reification, are *really* like, research should conceptualise 'audiences' as a relational or interactional construct, as a way of focusing on the diverse set of relationships between people and media forms.⁷ Instead of asking what texts mean or what people do with texts, research should ask how texts are located and understood as part of, indeed as agents in, the practices of people's daily lives. Audience reception research is pulled in two contrary directions, for it must stay with the text, while simultaneously exploring the connections between text and context, where context is ever more broadly conceived. This cannot be an either/or choice, but remains a tension at the heart of the field which should be productive not destructive of understanding the connections among audiences, media and contexts.

The audience becomes, then, a shorthand way of pointing to ways in which people stand in relationship to each other, rather than a thing of which people may or may not be a member and whose peculiar ways must be discovered. One consequence would be that of replacing the emphasis on concepts which imply a struggle between media and audience (negotiation, influence, appropriation, resistance, effect) with those concerned with modes of connection, relationship or communication (dialogic or monologic, direct or mediated communication, parasocial interaction; e.g. Thompson, 1990). The task for audience research becomes that of charting the possibilities and problems for communication, or relations among people, insofar as these are undermined or facilitated, managed or reconstituted by the media. Research may then avoid the tendency to reassert the reduction of the audience back to the (social)psychological or micro-level of analysis. Rather, audiences (plural) can be conceived relationally as an analytic concept relevant to, and providing links across, relations among people and media at all levels from the macro economic/cultural to the individual/psychological. Similarly, 'context' also must be understood vertically as well as horizontally, not simply as encompassing an ever wider spatial surround to the moment of viewing. And while changes in these relations between people and media may occur (or be conceived) primarily at one level of analysis, they will have implications for other levels.

In this paper I have argued that canonization of the field should be resisted. No unitary tradition and no one question can bear the weight of audience research -- whether it is the issue of resistant voices or contextualised embedded audiences or divergent readings. Nor can we seek a grand model which integrates all variables in grand scheme as these always tend towards reductionism and functionalism. I have suggested comparative analysis as a valuable research strategy for the next phase of audience research. This would make use of (and generate more) diversity in empirical findings in order to address contradictions, identify central tendencies, specify limits for hitherto unbounded claims and research empirically the comparisons often implied in the literature.

Such a comparative approach will cut across multiple levels of theorising, because the

⁷Interestingly, similar problems relating to the concept of 'the public' are avoided in the public sphere debate (Habermas, 1969) because the question is not what is the public and how does it think/act/respond, but rather, in what ways do people in their everyday activities constitute a public, what forms of communication are appropriate for a public sphere and what discursive or institutional threats does it face (Livingstone & Lunt, 1994)?

specification of dimensions for comparison themselves tend to draw upon different levels of analysis. This should become an explicit feature of audience theory. By reconceptualizing the audience as a construct which addresses relations between people and media in context at a number of interlinked analytic levels, several problems may be resolved. Particularly, the weak connections between audience research and neighbouring fields could be strengthened (see also ALEXANDER, THIS VOLUME), while the weaknesses within the field, generated by the reduction of audience research to the empirical demonstration of difference, even if they can be shown to be differences that matter, may be addressed. Clearly, these two points are related. If the audience research agenda addresses a broader range of questions through multilevel comparative analysis, it will generate conclusions which are both specific to particular contexts and also amenable to comparative analysis beyond those contexts. This in turn will represent research more directly valuable to fields including and beyond media theory.

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