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Media audiences, interpreters and users

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Media Audiences, Interpreters and Users

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

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

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

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

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

- The liberal or pluralist discourse locates the audience within the development of Western industrialised society, arguing that the media must reach the citizens – in

their role as audiences – if they are to gain the information, understanding and shared cultural values required to sustain the informed consent that underpins democratic governance. Yet within this democratic view of audiences lie also the seeds of doubt – what happens when audiences do not act in a selective or rational manner, or when the media don't provide fair or balanced information?

- Such doubts form the starting point for a critical or radical discourse. This positions audiences as consumers rather than citizens, seeing them as the managed subject of powerful institutional interests, vulnerable to political manipulation and commercial exploitation by the culture industries through subtle and pervasive strategies of mass communication. Yet here too there are signs of doubt – can the population be castigated so contemptuously for its apparently naïve, pleasure-seeking, herd-like behaviour, and is there no defence of the media?

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

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

2 Moral panics, media effects and the audience research agenda

2.1 Popular anxieties about the media audience

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

Not only are the questions about audiences wide-ranging but there are many policy makers, commercial organisations and academic disciplines that have a stake in debating the power and effects of the media. Consider the range of institutions concerned with audiences - from the politician's anxiety about ensuring an informed electorate to the education system's concern with literacy levels, from the advertising industry's relentless competition for market share to the labour market's demand for a hi-tech workforce. Add those who scapegoat the media - for their supposed moral impact on family life, on ethnic

stereotyping or on crime statistics. And it should be clear why the notion of audiences is so hotly contested, and why the audience research agenda is driven by many interests.

Activity 1.1

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The history of the audience, therefore, is one of historical continuities as well as discontinuities. Although we tend to find the discontinuities more interesting (or worrying) – how broadcasting breaks with the age of print, how the internet affords unprecedented possibilities for the global dissemination of information, and so on – it is important to bear the continuities in mind also, learning the lessons of history when faced with what seems, on first blush, entirely new. Richard Butsch's (2000) account of audiences through the centuries, illustrates the point that today's debates over active versus passive audiences have a longer history than is generally realised.

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

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

unintended consequences of communication. This is less a concern with the media themselves than with the meanings, practices and divisions within a society which depends on the media.

Activity 1.2

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

2.3 Twentieth century debates: oscillating between active and passive audiences

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

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

- First, selectivity. In Uses and Gratifications theory (Blumler and Katz, 1974), Katz asks not what the media do to people but what people do with the media because, as research readily shows, people are motivated, selected, active in their uses of the media. Others take this further, arguing that people are selective also in their interpretation of the media, guided by their prior knowledge as well as by the media text.
- Second, interpersonal relations. In his 'two-step flow' hypothesis (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955), Katz argued that because people talk to each other about the media, any media message must pass through the lens of these conversations. Consequently, some people in a community – the 'opinion leaders' – are influential in mediating the effect of the media themselves.

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

The influence of the media may also be expected to vary for particular segments of the audience, for people vary in their prior knowledge and interests, and in their access to alternative influences, including face-to-face communication. Moreover, as Butsch (2000) argued, some audiences have always been seen as vulnerable – women, for many centuries, and children, more recently. We will return to the image of women as a peculiar audience later, when we discuss the soap opera, but first we pursue the evidence for powerful media effects when it has been most often sought, namely in relation to children.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2.5   What are the effects of the media?

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

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

Causal relations are more difficult to establish, however. Is the correlation really due to some underlying third cause? Perhaps children who watch a lot of television come from homes both where other activities are lacking and where levels of aggression are higher? This would make the observed correlation between media and behaviour a spurious one, to be explained by the 'third cause' of social factors rather than by media effects. The direction of causality is also a tricky issue. It could be that playing aggressively in the playground encourages watching violent cartoons on television ('the hypothesis of selective exposure'), so that the behaviour affects media use rather than the other way around. Interestingly, it turns out that research supports all of these hypotheses, including the causal one that media exposure influences behaviour ('media effect'), for social behaviour is multiply determined and no single factor accounts for something as complex as playground behaviour.

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

- First, people are randomly assigned to experimental and control conditions, so that any third causes that matter under everyday circumstances are neutralised, for they would apply equally to experimental and control groups.

- Second, the independent variable (the hypothesised cause - the media exposure) precedes the dependent variable (the hypothesised effect - the measured behaviour), so that the direction of causality within the experimental setting is established.

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

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

This kind of research has been replicated, varied and extended in many different ways. Reviews of the literature agree that viewers learn both pro-social and anti-social attitudes and behaviour from television portrayals – interestingly, with pro-social effects (like helping others or being generous) being more pronounced than anti-social effects. Research also shows some more complex findings – for example, violent images in the

news affect older children more while younger children are more affected by cartoons. Younger children and, especially, boys, are much more likely to be influenced by anti-social contents. However, research is inconsistent over whether the effects last for very long – though some would say that, since children watch similar programmes every day, it hardly matters if the effects are only short-term, for they are never very far from their 'next dose'.

However, none of this need imply, and it certainly does not show, that beliefs or behaviours learned under experimental conditions can be generalized to viewers' ordinary lives. Problematically, results which are relatively consistent under experimental conditions are poorly replicated under naturalistic or everyday conditions. This has led critics to argue that the experiment represents such an unusual situation that the results cannot be generalised (indeed, some say that all children learn from experiments is to meet researchers' expectations).

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

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

3   Making sense of television: texts, audiences, meanings

3.1   From media effects to audience reception

Notwithstanding the critique of media effects research, most researchers do in fact believe that the media have effects – why study the media otherwise? Given that the media are thoroughly embedded in our lives, a major source of images and information, especially of social and political phenomena beyond our daily experience, how could we conclude that

they have no effect on how we think or act? Most research therefore draws qualified, modest and contingent or contextualised conclusions regarding media effects, recognising that, as in any other social science field, we will not find the single definitive study which resolves debate. It is to this notion of contingency or context that I now turn.

I'll illustrate this with Ellen Seiter's (1999) ethnographic study in which she describes a different kind of project on children and media effects. Seiter adopts a qualitative, ethnographic approach based on her lengthy and detailed observations when working in a nursery school. This leads her to critique the experimental approach and to replace it with a culturally-grounded analysis of media use. Why does she consider the cultural approach to be superior?

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

Activity 1.3

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

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

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

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

- audiences are plural, diverse, variable
- the meanings of media texts are a matter of interpretation
- the consequences of media 'exposure' or use depend on the social context.

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

3.2   Contrasting models of the communication process

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

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

sender → message → receiver

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

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

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

The critiques levelled at this model stimulated the development of an alternative model. One widely influential version of this from the critical tradition is Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding model. This proposes a cyclic rather than linear view of communication and centres on processes (encoding, decoding) rather than on actors (sender, receiver). Hall adopts a semiotic view of media contents in which 'the range of

11

meaning depends very much on the nature of the language and on the significance attaching to the patterned arrangement of given signs and symbols within a culture shared by sender (encoder) and receiver (decoder) alike' (McQuail and Windahl, 1993: 146) (c.f. Jessica's chapter). However, he also acknowledges that the cultures of sender and receiver may not be identical – for each is structurally positioned differently in society, most notably in terms of social class. As a result, although Hall emphasises the power of the encoded text, he allows for the possibility that audiences can resist this power.

Activity 1.4

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

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

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

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

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

The features of social life which previously 'got in the way' become the focus of the analysis. The media message is no longer treated as a stimulus – a package of meaning

whose contents are inflexible and obvious – but rather as a text whose meaning is polysemic, negotiable, to be interpreted (c.f. Jessica's chapter). As the semiotican Umberto Eco explains,

> 'The existence of various codes and subcodes, the variety of sociocultural circumstances in which a message is emitted (where the codes of the addressee can be different from those of the sender) … result in making a message... an empty form to which various possible senses can be attributed' (Eco, 1979: 5).

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

3.3   Case study: the soap opera

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

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

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

Robert Allen's (1995) introduction to his edited volume on the global success of the soap opera shows how the soap opera establishes a particular 'interpretative contract' with viewers. Thus the text anticipates what its reader (the viewer) already knows and what she wants to be shown next, guiding the viewer in certain directions according to conventions familiar to both text and reader. But the text also leaves open some opportunities –

through a structured series of 'gaps' - for the viewer to think her own thoughts, draw her own interferences, assert her own preferences.

To theorise this active role of the reader or viewer, Allen introduces some concepts from literary theory – particularly Wolfgang Iser's 'implied reader' (in the text) and its contingent relation with 'real' or 'empirical' readers (in the audience). He draws on Umberto Eco's distinction between open and closed texts to argue that some texts invite readers to insert their own knowledge and interests while other texts work hard to eliminate this, being more directive in determining what meanings readers get from the text. Try Activity 5 to see how this works.

Activity 1.5

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

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

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

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

In the *Export of Meaning* project, Tamar Liebes and Elihu Katz (1990) investigated one particular thesis of media power, the idea of Americanisation or cultural imperialism. This thesis was epitomised for many by the unexpected global success of the American prime-

time soap opera, *Dallas*. Commentators argued that powerful media were imposing a particular (i.e. American, consumerist, Christian) value system on the world. So, having conducted a textual analysis to identify the implied reader, Liebes and Katz showed an episode to small friendship groups from a range of diverse cultural settings in Israel, listening carefully for the ways people approached the programme spontaneously, inviting them to 'retell' the episode as if to someone who missed it, and analysing the social interaction in front of the screen as people collectively decoded the episode.

In chapter 4 of *The Export of Meaning*, Liebes and Katz (1990) analyse the discussion during one of these groups – three Jewish couples of Moroccan origin. On the left are the comments of the viewers (those numbered 10-14 occurred before the episode was played; those numbered 30-35 occurred during viewing; the discussion also continued afterwards). On the right, the researchers identify a series of categories to interpret the viewers' interpretations of the episode. They did this intuitively, so you should check their interpretation, and also ask whether there is evidence here of other categories of audience response in this text?

The researchers' analysis of the text had suggested that Dallas centred on 'primordial themes' - lineage, inheritance, sibling rivalry, property, sex and marriage. Yet the empirical audience study found that viewers of different social and cultural backgrounds generated different interpretations. For example, Russian Jews were more likely to make ideological readings responding to the moral and political themes underlying the narratives. Americans focused more on the personalities and motivations of the characters to make their readings coherent (Allen's paradigmatic dimension). Moroccan Arabs instead emphasised event sequencing and narrative continuity (Allen's syntagmatic dimension). And while each group's reading was clearly constrained by the text, each also engaged with the openness of the text to draw on their diverse cultural resources, resulting in divergent readings of the 'same' programme. What is less obvious is how to theorise these cultural resources: Liebes and Katz's groups vary in terms of ethnicity, nationality, religion and social class, and it is not clear which factors make a difference in the groups' decoding of different aspects of the text.

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

3.4   Consolidating the audience reception approach

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

are anticipated, enabled or restricted by the degree of closure encoded into the text or genre.

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

To take another example – this time showing how reception studies on children have advanced beyond the 'effects paradigm' – Patricia Palmer's *The Lively Audience* (1986) showed the importance of age, gender and family circumstances. Hence, "with the development of an understanding of narratives, of story and character, older children make more complex demands on their favourite TV shows" (p.121). After the age of 8 or 9, children prefer more realistic and complex programmes instead of the cartoons or toy animal shows they liked earlier. More importantly, they interpret shows differently as they learn to make subtle judgements about genre expectations, the sequencing of narratives, the realism of what is portrayed and the relation between the drama and their own lives. But this doesn't mean they simply copy televised events or display shared media experiences but rather – as we saw in Ellen Seiter's work – they use media to define their identities, to negotiate friendships through role play and to work out rules for social interaction in the playground.

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

In consequence, audience researchers have come to agree on several points. First, one should not make assumptions about how audiences will perceive a text from knowledge of the text alone – and so media analysis should combine studies of production, text and audience rather than study each separately. Second, one cannot talk of the audience in the

singular or, indeed, of the singular meaning or impact of particular media contents – and so audiences must always be located within specific everyday social contexts. Third, media power is a two-way interactive process, even though many of the cards remain in the hands of the media producers and even though audiences are more constrained by their own circumstances than free to read anything they like into a text – and so the myth of direct media effects and of passive vulnerable audiences should be at last laid to rest.

4   Where next for active audiences?

4.1   Critical responses to audience reception research

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

Activity 1.6

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

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

- *Identifying the implied reader*. How confidently can we identify the dominant meanings (Stuart Hall's 'preferred reading') in media texts? Analysis of audience response rests on a prior analysis of media texts and genres. If we cannot reliably identify the textual gaps, the degree of openness or closure, the conventions of the genre, etc then how can we know when the text is guiding the reader and when the reader/viewer is being creative or resistant?

- *The limits of audience activity*. Many are concerned that audience research has exaggerated the extent of audience activity, overestimating the power of the audience compared with the power of the media. John Fiske's celebration of the 'sovereign viewer', faced with the 'unlimited semiosis' (or 'semiotic democracy') of the text, famously attracted many counterclaims pointing to structural limits on audience diversity and, more important, the audience's resistance to ideology or cultural imperialism.

- *The problem of contextualization*. Research has looked for various demographic and contextual factors shaping viewers' orientation to the media. But these hardly encompass the complexities of everyday life. So, should the moment of reception be contextualized in what Paul Willis calls 'the whole way of life'? It seems that the more research explores contexts of media use (to avoid 'media-centrism') the less

17

attention is paid to the moment of reception or the media text. And the more a specifically social analysis is lost in charting individual variability within the audience.

▪ *Competing theories.* 'Audience reception theory' masks key differences in theoretical origin and orientation. It draws on social constructivist social psychology (asking how people make sense of social life), on feminist media studies (re-evaluating the marginalised or ridiculed media often enjoyed by women) and on anthropological or ethnographic studies of everyday contexts of mass consumption, to name but some traditions. And despite the interconnections between literary (Eco, Iser, Allen) and critical (Hall, Morley, Seiter) approaches, these differences also matter.

▪ *The end of the audience?* It is apparent that most research centres on television viewers and on well-established genres – soaps, news, children's shows, etc. But television is changing, diversifying and, most important, converging with new media to create a complex media-rich environment. Is this the end of the mass audience or will the lessons of mass audience studies continue to be relevant in the new media environment?

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

4.2   Changing contexts, changing media

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

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

We could say 'users' – media users, users of the internet, etc – but this is rather individualistic and instrumental, losing the idea of a collectivity which is central to 'the audience'. After all, mass communication has always been communication from the one to the many; however, on the internet, most obviously, communication is increasingly one-to-

one or peer-to-peer rather than mass communication, so we must now ask, rather than assume, how far mediated communication leads to a shared or communal understanding. Also, 'user' doesn't necessarily relate to communication at all, for it applies just as well to users of the washing machine or toaster. In other words, the more we focus on varieties of media technologies, the more audience research shifts away from questions of reception and moves into asking questions about the consumption of goods or services.

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

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

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

Activity 1.7

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

Some changes turn out to be fairly predictable. For example, media typically start out as household possessions and are gradually transformed – getting cheaper, smaller, more mobile – into personal possessions in a media-rich household. Consider the transformation of the telephone into the mobile phone, the wireless into the transistor radio, the household television into the portable or bedroom set, the desk top computer into the laptop.

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

- The multiplication of personal media (walkman, mobile phone, laptop computer) seems to encourage the social process of *privatisation* (the 'bedroom culture' of young people, for example), undermining that participation in a shared culture and a public space which a national mass media arguably once supported.

- The diversification of media contents – multiple television channels, the world wide web, musical subcultures – seems to encourage the social process of *individualisation* (or perhaps 'subculturalisation'*)*, transforming the culture from one in which parents socialize children according to well-established traditions to one in which each new generation feels free (even, is required), to invent its own lifestyle, its own 'project of the self', using the resources of the media (see Thompson, 1995).

- Since many of these new media and media contents are transnational in their scope, it seems that audiences are increasingly *global* whereas previously they were mainly national or local. Do audiences share more with others across the globe than with their next door neighbours (see Gillespie's chapter in this volume)?

- The *interactivity* of new media, especially the internet, is something we have yet to theorise. New interactive technologies put the interpretative activities of the audience or user at the very centre of media design. On the internet, for example, there is no text beyond the home page without an active reader clicking, selecting, ignoring, contributing, etc, making the text-reader metaphor of reception studies particularly apt.

- So, what are the emerging genres of new media and how do these open up, guide or close down on audiences' interpretation, indeed their active creation of the dynamic flow of new media texts (- the path through the web, the to-and-fro of chat, the outcome of the online game, the intertextual mixing of different media contents)? And how does the social context – particularly as people blur learning and leisure, information and communication, production and reception – shape their engagement with media?

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

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