

Introduction



The 'audience' has become a volatile battleground within the media industries and a controversial concept within media and cultural studies. Politicians, academics, parents and educationists, have all weighed into the debate on such issues as cultural 'dumbing down' and the allegedly pernicious effects of television violence. Certainties about the nature of the audience seem to have been eroded in inverse proportion to advances made in the technology of measurement. It has even been argued that, in any meaningful way, 'audience' exists only as a discursive entity, an epistemological fiction necessary for the maintenance of broadcasting economies. Be that as it may, real people actually do watch television and listen to the radio, real audiences do exist. The question remains, however; how are we to conceptualise 'audience'?

The word 'audience' has traditionally been used to refer to a group of people gathered together to watch and listen to some kind of public performance or address. The notion of audience with which we are familiar today existed in classical Greece and Rome. Denis McQuail (1997, p. 15) characterises this audience as follows:

- planning and *organisation* 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 experience;
- voluntary, individual acts of choice and attention;
- specialisation of roles, authors, performers and spectators;

- a specific physical location where a performance is attended by an audience.

The distinctive feature of such an audience is that its members are all in the same place at the same time, watching/viewing the same thing, albeit constructing different interpretations. But this notion of 'audience' has been radically transformed by the mass media. The traditional audience does still exist (in the theatre, for example), but the television and radio audience is significantly different. It is fragmented and situated in innumerable physical locations. It is also temporally fragmented: any one programme will be watched or listened to at different times, either because of time-shifting with any increasing range of recorders or through varied patterns of scheduling by broadcasters. Radio, television and films can also be accessed from the Internet, from anywhere in the world at any time of day or night.

The quest to understand the audience has been pursued at different levels. There is the desire to understand what happens when a reader/spectator engages with a text: how do audiences make sense of what they see and hear? What are the conditions of meaning? There are long standing concerns about the effects of the media: in what ways do they influence behaviour? In commerce there is, of course, a financial imperative associated with behaviour modification. The need of the advertiser is to reach as large an audience as possible in the hope of increasing sales. It is with advertising that audience research largely began.

This ***Teacher's Guide*** begins with a brief overview of the history of audience research, outlining some of the issues dealt with more thoroughly later in the book. This is followed by more detailed accounts of the major theoretical approaches to *audience studies*: effects, uses and gratification and ethnological/reception research. This is followed by an overview of how audience research is done for television, radio and cinema and concludes with a consideration of recent developments

in reception studies of fans. Finally, there is an account of reality TV, which by its very nature conflates issues of technology and the construction of the audience. The aim of the Guide is to provide a comprehensive guide to both the theory and practice of audience research that will serve the needs of teachers and students of Film and Media Studies.

Early Investigations

Will Brooker argues that the 'first transitional moment in the twentieth century in terms of the rise of audience studies' was World War I (Brooker 2003, p. 5) with the widespread use of the mass media for propaganda purposes. Propaganda had always been a feature of warfare, but in WWI it reached unprecedented levels of intensity. In the 1920s this led to both a concern and interest in the potential of the mass media for manipulating and controlling minds for both political and commercial purposes. The image of a passive audience that this implies, became part of the way in which society was characterised by the emerging 'mass society' thesis, which was supported by both the left and right in the 1930s. It seemed to be confirmed by the rise of Hitler and the Nazi Party and their use of the mass media. On the left of the political spectrum, the Frankfurt School (T.W. Adorno et al.) argued that culture was imposed from above onto a malleable and impressionable audience. Furthermore, the emerging 'mass culture industries', in particular, Hollywood and advertising threatened the values of this culture.

When broadcasting began in the 1920s, the USA, unlike the UK, opted for a free market system funded by advertising and sponsorship. It was not long before broadcasters and advertisers felt the need to investigate the efficacy of advertising and sponsorship. To begin with audience research was no more than a fairly primitive 'head count' achieved by requesting listeners to send a postcard if they were listening to the programme.

In fact John Grierson, who played such a seminal role in the creation of the British documentary movement, only became interested in film when his research in the American press faltered and it was suggested to him that he looked at Hollywood as an alternative. That was in 1928.

Audience research began at the BBC more or less the same way (Silvey 1974). Academic interest in the media was focused on the press and cinema.

In 1930, the first major enquiry into the effects of cinema on children was published in the USA. As to whether or not cinema had a negative influence on children, it was equivocal: a sign of things to come with television audience research.

Effects theory characterised the relationship between audience and media as one of subordination. The assumption was that responses were predictable, measurable and directly related to a specific media stimulus – a notion that was reassuring to politicians and advertisers alike. It became known as the '**hypodermic needle**' model, based upon the behaviourist idea of stimulus–response. However, whilst this might have worked with Pavlov's dogs, it was inadequate when it came to accounting for the complex emotional and thought processes that occur when an audience engages with a text.

A significant shift occurred in the 1940s, eventually leading to the effects approach being turned on its head. The shortcomings of the effects model were demonstrated by Paul Lazarsfeld et al.'s *The People's Choice: How the Voter Makes Up His Mind in a Presidential Campaign*. This was a study of the role of the media in the 1940 presidential campaign in which 600 people were questioned over the seven months prior to the election. The results, at the time, were surprising. The role of the media was found to be small and the direct link between media-message and behaviour was missing. In the third edition of the study, published in 1968, Lazarsfeld commented on a finding that had subsequently emerged from the research. It was found that what was significant in the formation of opinion was 'a great deal of person-to-person interaction'. The research produced evidence of the role of a group of articulate individuals who functioned as 'opinion leaders': their influence, and the general interaction of

group members, was far more important in the formation of opinion than the mass media. This conclusion formed the basis of the **'two step flow'** theory, i.e., that opinion is formed not 'top down' (the media down to the individual) but rather 'bottom up', through the intercession of the 'opinion leaders'. Lazarsfeld argued that opinion leaders themselves do not necessarily operate vertically, but also 'horizontally: there are opinion leaders in every walk of life' (1968, p.7). *The People's Choice* brought into question the ability of the media to directly influence opinion and behaviour, and as such undermined the central tenet of effects studies. However, as with all audience research, it raised questions, such as how much can validly be extrapolated from what was a very particular study of audience responses and then applied to audiences in general.

'Uses and gratification' shifted the focus from what the media did to the audience, to what the audience did with the media. The audience was conceived as being active interpreter-users, rather than passive recipients of mass media messages. A study undertaken by Katz, Gurevitch and Haas (1974) concluded that audiences discriminate among the media, looking for content that conforms to their psychological and social needs. This conclusion highlighted both the strength and weakness of uses and gratification theory insofar as it shifted (even more than Lazarsfeld had done) the emphasis towards the audience; but at the same time it provided a limited notion of media choice and use.

That audiences vary in their responses to the media was the subject of research undertaken at the University of Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in the 1970s. A seminal paper was Stuart Hall's 1974 *Coding and Encoding in the Television Discourse* and subsequently used by David Morley in his *Nationwide* research. This proposed that audiences' readings are determined by their gender, social and ideological positions. Messages are encoded with a preferred reading, but audiences may well have different and alternative interpretations.

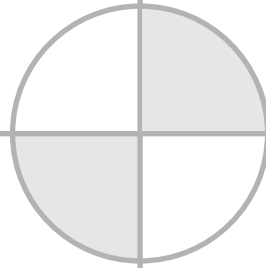
Morley's work marked a shift towards an **ethnological approach** to audience studies. These have been many and varied from the tentative steps towards working with 'real' audiences undertaken by Morley, to the participant-observer studies undertaken by Henry Jenkins. The potential weaknesses of this kind of work are clear, but perhaps no more disabling than those that come with any other approach to audience research. With much ethnographic research there are two layers of interpretation: there is the respondent's own memory, selection and construction of their responses, which in turn is then interpreted by the researcher. But such difficulties do not invalidate this work.

The ethnographical approach to reader response studies was pioneered by Janice Radway in her 1984 study of women's pleasure in reading romance fiction (*Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature*). This study distanced itself from traditional academic literary studies in two ways: it took as its object of study a generally denigrated popular literary form, and employed research methods that were closer to anthropology than literary analysis. Radway argued that, for the women she worked with, what was read was as significant as how and why it was read. The act of reading itself was crucial in defining a personal space, separated from both the world of work and domestic responsibilities. Radway, in her introduction to the 1991 edition of *Reading the Romance*, highlighted a difficulty that is attendant upon much ethnographic work and that is the mediating influence she exerted in constructing the community of readers that she analysed. Radway rightly advocates a 'multifaceted approach' to audience studies embracing both ethnography and textual analysis.

The 'third generation' of ethnographic audience studies has focused on groups of fans. The work of Henry Jenkins, for example, has looked at *Star Trek* fans as an active interpretative community that uses the programme for a range of extra-textual activities that serve to reaffirm group and individual identities while enabling the fan audience to creatively appropriate the text and make it

their own, to the point of challenging Paramount over issues of gay representation. Other studies with an ethnographic element include Janice Radway's work on women and their reading of Romantic fiction and Ang's work on *Dallas* and its audiences.

Audience Research



Forms of Research

Audience Research

There are two forms of research: **applied** and **theoretical**. Applied research tends to be carried out by, or on behalf of, commercial broadcasters and publishers: it 'is designed to supply practical information that can guide decision-making' (Walker et al. 2000, p. 1). The information needed is both the size of the audience and its demographic profile, including social class, age and gender. Theoretical research has tended to be undertaken by academic bodies. Some of the questions posed by this kind of research either have no immediate commercial 'pay off' or may even be inimical to commercial interests, insofar as there is a good deal of research that sets out to show that television is 'bad for you', in terms of its alleged negative influence on behaviour and even, as some critics have argued, on the culture itself. Typical of the sort of questions posed by this kind of research are:

- effects of watching violence on television,
- why people use the media,
- explanations of how mass audiences are formed.

(Walker et al. p. 3)

Commercial (applied) audience research, so long yoked primarily to measurement, no longer diverts so radically from academic research. This is in part because of the continuing fragmenting of the television market through

A linked development is interactive media. To date, this does not seem to have gone much further than enabling the audience to 'press the red' button and vote. It is, however, through technological developments such as TiVo in the US and Sky Plus in the UK, some factual programmes, such as Walking with Cavemen (BBC, 2003) utilise an interactive element to provide audiences with supplementary information. Interactive television is likely to develop and incorporate elements of audience research: it is early days yet.

the expansion of cable, satellite and digital broadcasting and the concomitant increase in niche channels and programming: broadcasters need to know more about their audiences.

Whether it is applied or theoretical research, the first question is, what is being researched? The kinds of research questions that applied research attempts to answer can be summarised as follows:

1. Print (magazines and newspapers):

- the degree of recall on whether people remember seeing an advert;
- copy testing to assess the appeal/informativeness of messages;
- the study of characteristics of people who read various publications.

2. Electronic Media:

- surveys to assess appeal of celebrities and popular music;
- auditorium testing to evaluate pilot programmes;
- ratings research to measure size and composition of audiences.

The audience is easier to measure in some media than others. Cinema and theatre audiences not only have a clear physical presence, but they are also relatively easy to measure, through box office takings. With print media, although the number of readers is difficult to determine with any accuracy, there is at least a reliable base line which is the number that are sold. It is reasonable to assume that virtually all newspapers and magazines sold are read by at least one person, in fact the press work by the 'thumb rule' of three readers to every copy. But what of television? There are no box office receipts and neither is there anything tangible bought and sold. How then is the television audience to be measured? The