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AUDIENCE AND READERSHIP RESEARCH

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Any theory about the media is incomplete if it does not take audiences (or “readers”) into account. We may analyze texts and the processes through which they are produced, but without understanding *audiences*, such analyses can imply more than they deliver. To fully assess the media’s role in society—its mediation, limitations, and sometimes unexpected implications—we need to study how people “read,” use, and respond to the media. This is perhaps the most difficult task of all. The audience is an ephemeral and inherently relational concept. Audiences are defined, at least initially, in relation to texts (films, news bulletins, soap operas) or objects (such as books, radio, or TV sets). Quite *who* constitutes the audience, as well as when, where, and under what circumstances, is necessarily elastic. There is a corresponding wide variety in the techniques used to study audiences, the contexts within which they are placed, and the meanings made out of such research. Any one interested in audience research should also heed the warning offered by Nightingale (1996):

Just as people as audiences cannot be separated from personal, social and cultural continuity, so texts cannot be isolated from their broader cultural significance, or from the history of that significance. The audience-text relation is a chimera, which can only ever be apprehended partially. We think we are seeing reality when what we

see is more like a holographic reflection, changing as our own point of reference changes and dependent on our ability to see—on the quality of our vision. Audience is a shifty concept. (p. 148)

When reviewing audience research, it is useful to reflect on who is interested in the audience, as well as how questions are framed and audiences envisaged. This chapter starts by outlining four different spheres of concern that prompt such research. It then focuses on debates between those investigating the media's role in relation to politics, culture, and identity. This sets the scene for outlining how researchers select the focus of enquiry and the diverse data collection methods they use. The following discussion thus covers the following:

- ◆ The impetus for audience research
- ◆ Framing the question—a review of diverse approaches and disputes
- ◆ Framing the audience—deciding *who* to study (when and where)
- ◆ Data collection techniques and approaches

This chapter is based on the premise that decisions about *where* to look and *how* to look are inextricably intertwined with ideas about what is important. Research is not an asocial, apolitical linear process based on selecting your question, choosing an appropriate method, and then simply analyzing and presenting findings. Research is embedded in a web of processes involving the socioeconomic conditions of production, disciplinary divisions, academic routines, historical context, knowledge paradigms, and interrelated decisions about questions, foci, and methods of enquiry (see Figure 8.1).

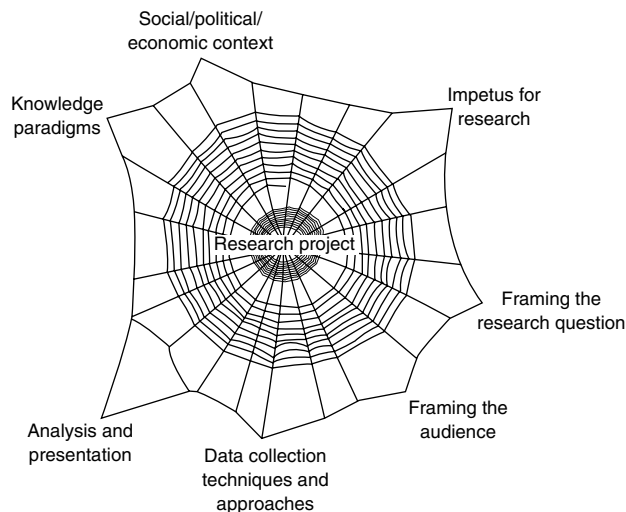


Figure 8.1 Conducting Research Involves a Network of Interrelated Decisions

NOTE: The spider's web is a more useful metaphor for research than the linear ladder.

◆ *The Impetus for
Audience Research:
Four Spheres of Concern*

The impetus for empirical research into audiences can be grouped under four broad spheres.

Market Imperatives. This research scrutinizes and seeks to manage audiences as consumers/commodities. People are approached as commercial units to be delivered to businesses, advertisers, or media organizations (Ang, 1991). Such research is concerned primarily with measuring audiences, identifying their sociodemographic distribution, and tracking issues such as attention flow and channel loyalty. This often involves audience panels, surveys, and monitoring via electronic means such as the “people meter” or continuous response measurements via handsets (Millard, 1992).

Concerns About Morality and Sex 'n' Violence. This research is concerned with the potential corrupting influence of the media. Much of this work is framed by psychological theories and relies on experimental laboratory-based studies. Such research is often conducted in response to long-running debates about copycat violence that have lasted from the first penny newspaper to the 1990s video nasties¹ controversies.

Responses to Technological Developments. This research asks questions about the implications of new media and communication devices. In the first part of the 20th century, research focused on cinema or the radio; today, it is more likely to focus on the Internet and interactive digital TV. Although this can involve a very narrow technological focus, such research is often conducted under the broader auspices of anthropology, history, or the sociology of science and technology. Such work thus shades into my fourth category as follows.

Questions About Culture, Politics, and Identity. The impetus for research inspired under this rubric is a concern with the media's role in the public and domestic realm. It examines how the media might frame public understandings and citizenship *and* how people use media texts and objects in negotiating interpersonal power relations or developing identities, pleasures, and fantasies. Such work includes much of the sociological enquiry into media effects and the cultural studies tradition, as well as questions about the role of media objects as items of domestic technology. This category embraces some uncomfortable bedfellows and cannot, of course, be completely segregated from the others outlined above. The division between approaching audiences as commercial units and as citizens is also not necessarily clear-cut and can itself be subject to analysis from within the “culture-politics-identity” perspective.

The above categories should thus not be seen as cast in stone. I offer them rather as basic navigational aids to help reflect on where specific audience research efforts are “coming from.” In highlighting the different impetus *behind* research questions, the aim is to encourage reflective approaches to how research is framed and conducted. It would be a mistake to assume that certain areas of substantive enquiry are confined within one sphere.

Let me illustrate this with the example of enquiries into the media and interpersonal violence and abuse. This substantive area is often reviewed as if research were confined to the “morality and sex 'n' violence” tradition, addressing issues such as whether media representations of violence desensitize viewers or if such representations lead to copycat attacks. Examples of such research would include experiments by Bandura and colleagues with Bobo dolls (Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1963) or the declarations made by psychologists about the dangers of certain videos (Barker & Petley, 2001). However, this substantive area can be explored from very diverse perspectives. Audiences can be approached as markets (“What type or level

of violence makes viewers turn on or turn off; what is acceptable to viewers of this channel?"). Alternatively, a narrow interest in technological developments would prioritize questions such as the following: "Does the Internet create new channels for pedophiles?" Research under my fourth category (culture, politics, and identity) would take a very different approach, generating multiple enquiries concerning pleasure, identity, judgment, influence, and understanding. Researchers have studied how media representations of sexual violence influence public understandings, how viewers relate to victims and perpetrators on screen, and how responses are mediated by personal experience. They have also explored how the media resource survivor identities, the forms of pleasure found in violent movies, and how Black women negotiate with film representations that expose sexual violence but promote ideas of Black male brutality (Bobo, 1995; Hill, 2001; Kitzinger, 2000, 2001; Philo, 1999a; Schlesinger, Dobash, Dobash, & Weaver, 1992).

The range of questions that arise among those interested in culture, politics, and identity points to the broad nature of this fourth category and the need for further unpacking. It is this category that informs most academic work within media studies and has generated the most fruitful and diverse empirical approaches, as well as being the site of intense conflict. The next section therefore reviews the evolution of different research foci and theoretical approaches developed under this remit, both *reflecting* and *promoting* different research designs.

◆ *Diverse Questions
on Audiences, Culture,
Politics, and Identity:
A Brief Review of Conflicting
Theories and Approaches*

The origins of contemporary mass media studies are often located in 1930s Germany,

where academics within the Frankfurt school responded to Germany's descent into fascism by developing theories about mass public responses to propaganda. Since then, the field has undergone many transmutations. The Frankfurt school's hypodermic model (of direct effects) was challenged by a two-step model of mediated influence (highlighting the importance of social networks and opinion leaders) and by "uses and gratifications," which argued that individuals use the media for their own purposes. Such approaches now compete alongside theories about the media's power to cultivate certain understandings of the world (cultivation theory; Gerbner, 1973) or priorities (agenda-setting theory; McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Each approach set up a new research question in opposition to others. Uses and gratifications theory, for example, demands that we ask "not what the media do to the public but what the public do with the media," whereas agenda-setting theory asserts that we should look at the media's role in telling us "not *what* to think but what to think *about*."

A turning point in audience research was established in the late 1970s by Stuart Hall's model of encoding and decoding (Hall, 1980). Hall argued that texts are polysemic and that there is no necessary correspondence between the message encoded by the film or program maker and that decoded by audiences. To understand the role of the media, Hall argued that one must discover how different groups respond to any particular program. Hall promoted a *social* theory of subjectivity and meaning construction, arguing that audience research should be in the business of locating "significant clusters" of meaning and linking these to the social and discursive positioning of readers.

It was this understanding that laid the groundwork in the 1980s and 1990s for the burgeoning of a series of in-depth qualitative studies attentive to audience interpretation and activity. These studies focused on *groups* and sampled along

diverse social variables because of the interest in “interpretative communities.” The first and most famous of these is David Morley’s (1980) study, “The Nationwide Audience.” At first, class differences were the main focus of attention (at least within U.K. research), but debates about American cultural colonialism across Europe also helped encourage interest in ethnic diversity and cross-cultural interpretations (e.g., Ang, 1985; Katz & Liebes, 1985). At the same time, the rise of gay liberation and feminism influenced a growing interest in “queer” and “camp” readings, as well as prompting work into women’s enjoyment of a despised cultural output, the soap opera. Distinct strands of research were developed that focused on exploring pleasure and identifying cultural competencies as well as claiming “fandom” as a crucial area of study (e.g., Hobson, 1982; Lewis, 1992).

During the 1980s and 1990s, researchers also increasingly focused on how the media were consumed as objects as well as texts. David Morley himself became dissatisfied with the artificial nature of showing videos to groups who might not have watched them otherwise and would certainly not have done so under the same circumstances (in the same groups, with the same degree of attention). He became interested in the home as a site of consumption and began to pursue more naturalistic research methods, leading to an increased interest in how people negotiated “living room politics” around media technologies (Morley, 1986). In a parallel development coming from a background in literary studies, Janice Radway (1984) highlighted the importance of the act of reading as much as the nature of the text. She argued that although the text might promote an anti-feminist message, the practice of reading could be women’s way of creating space for themselves and resisting the demands of their families (Radway, 1984).

The 1980s and early 1990s, then, particularly within media/cultural studies in the United Kingdom, saw a turn to three

dimensional qualitative work exploring many different dimensions of audiences: opening up new ways of researching media reception and new ways of theorizing power. These developments were not, however, viewed without some disquiet. Fierce disputes arose about the balance between attention to the “public” and “private” spheres and the extent to which audience activity was being exaggerated and “the message” ignored (see Corner, 1991; Eldridge, Kitzinger, & Williams, 1997; Gray, 1999; Miller & Philo, 2001). Many researchers insisted on the need to return to or retain a concern with how media texts might influence public understandings despite, or in light of, audience activity. Researchers at Glasgow, for example, built on previous text-based work carried out by the Glasgow University Media Group (1976, 1980) to explore how media representations might relate to public understanding. They used focus groups to research how people made sense of issues ranging from industrial disputes or “terrorism” to “mad cow” disease (bovine spongiform encephalopathy [BSE]) and AIDS. Much of this work sought to examine media “effects” while also taking into account how interpretation, pleasure, and social networks mediated audience-text relations. For examples of this work, see *Getting the Message* (Eldridge, 1993), *The Circuit of Mass Communication* (Miller, Kitzinger, Williams, & Beharrell, 1998), and *Message Received* (Philo, 1999b). Similar in-depth studies were being conducted elsewhere into issues such as the media’s role in framing people’s talk about Arab-Israeli conflict (Gamson, 1992), responses to nuclear energy (Corner, Richardson, & Fenton, 1990), and the influence of television programs such as *The Cosby Show* on racism (Jhally & Lewis, 1992). In combination, such work represents a body of “new effects research” (see Kitzinger, 1999, 2002).

It is against this backdrop that audience research needs to be understood. Studying audiences is never innocent. How audiences are investigated will always interact with

the dimensions outlined above, although, at least in theory, this *should* be a two-way process. The next part of the chapter raises sampling issues—how to constitute audience research participants, as well as who, when, and where to study—before moving on to outline diverse data collection techniques.

◆ *Framing the Sky: Defining the Audience and Deciding Who to Study*

The elasticity and sheer scale of mass media audiences means that sampling for audience research is rather like trying to frame the sky. Researchers have to decide who constitute a meaningful group of research participants in the context of their particular research aims. The potential audience might include the whole population of a country (or even several countries) or everyone who owns a specific media technology. It might be people who watch a program genre (such as talk shows) or have watched a specific documentary or film. Researchers may opt for large-scale work that aims for a statistically representative sample (a scale of research often necessitating methods such as questionnaires), or they may opt to explore specific fan groups or communities (e.g., Radway's [1984] community of romance readers). Alternatively, the key research questions may mean that the best type of sample is one that maximizes possible diversity of interpretation or response (e.g., taking snapshots of different audience groups from very diverse backgrounds or across cultures).

Researchers also have to consider questions about the unit, place, time frame, and context of any audience study. Do people consume as individuals or families or communities? What constitutes “doing audiencehood,” and is it separable from being a consumer, a citizen, or a member of the public? How do you study the reception of a particular text? How do you examine the experience of watching one news bulletin,

given all the other media messages and sources of information within which audience reception is embedded? Can reactions to a particular media episode be separated from the surrounding flow? Is it possible to look at the TV audience separate from the newspaper reader? What counts as watching television? What if the TV set is on and the individual is in the same room but not paying attention, or what if someone has not seen that episode of her favorite soaps but catches up on what happened through discussion during the lunch break at work?

Academics may try to tap into audiencehood through showing research participants a video of a program, but people consume the media in many different ways beyond the immediate process of watching, viewing, or listening and self-conscious postmortem discussions. People are arguably “doing audience work” when they exchange ideas on the bus or via the Internet. Fans may build up elaborate ways of relating to texts, which include how they decorate their rooms, what they wear, which catchphrases they integrate into their talk, and how they orientate their social lives. Arguably, the media may be implicated in this way even for people who do not consider themselves fans.

There is no perfect sample or single ideal time and place to research audiences. How researchers have addressed the above dilemmas varies with their research aims, resources, and disciplinary traditions. Questions about who, what, when, and where to study are inextricably intertwined with how audience research is conducted. The next section provides an overview of data collection techniques and approaches.

◆ *Data Collection Techniques and Approaches*

SURVEYS AND QUESTIONNAIRES

Large-scale questionnaire surveys are used within audience research to map

audiences in broad brushstrokes (e.g., by sociodemographic variables and consumption patterns). Surveys are also used to access representative samples of audience views. In addition to providing basic profiles of the audience, surveys are employed to identify *correlations* between the mass media and the mass audience. Statistical analyses are used within cultivation theory to examine associations between amount of TV viewing and attitudes (Gerbner, 1973) and within agenda-setting research to compare the amount of media attention given to a particular issue and the priority assigned to it by the public (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Surveys may also be used to compare the information presented in the media to what people know (e.g., Lewis et al., 1999, cited in Ruddock, 2001).

Questionnaires can also be used to complement qualitative work. Surveys help position qualitative findings in context and may highlight key factors unidentified in smaller scale qualitative enquiry (see Livingstone, Wober, & Lunt, 1994). They can also be offered to research participants as a means of private communication. For example, focus group participants can be explicitly invited to note down anything they felt unable to contribute to the group discussion. Discrepancies between what is revealed by questionnaires and what is discussed within the group can be used as a double check and might be interpreted as validation/invalidation. Alternatively, such discrepancies can be a source of insight into how media information is socially processed and the framing of popular discourse (see discussion of focus groups, presented later).

LETTERS, E-MAILS, ONLINE EXCHANGES, AND FAN WEB SITES

Another way of gaining access to audience data is to examine written correspondence (prompted or unprompted, on paper or online). The most famous letter-based

research is Ien Ang's (1985) analysis of *Dallas*, in which she invited people to write to her describing what they liked or disliked about the program. Other studies have analyzed the letters or e-mails sent to news editors, program producers, or actors. These include, for example, analysis of Internet mail messages sent to *NBC Nightly News* (Newhagen, Cordes, & Levy, 1995), "parasocial interaction" in audience letters to a popular Indian television soap opera (Sood & Rogers, 2000), and meaning making and empowerment in letters to the South African media NGO Soul City (Tufté, 2002).

There are now also increasing opportunities to study audiences via online exchanges and Web sites. Indeed, this is not just an opportunity but also an imperative, as the World Wide Web becomes an extension of TV viewing and a new site of performing "audiencehood." Hine (2000), for example, examined online discussion of the Louise Woodward news story, and Baym (2000) studied online discussion of soap operas. Brooker (2001) looked at how teen audiences used dedicated Internet sites around the TV drama *Dawson's Creek*, and Pullen (2000) analyzed Web sites dedicated to the New Zealand-produced cult program *Xena: Warrior Princess*.

INTERVIEWS, GROUP DISCUSSIONS, AND FOCUS GROUPS

Actually talking to people (as individuals or as groups) offers the opportunity for researchers to pursue their particular questions (rather than focusing on the spontaneous interests of online correspondents) and to probe at length. *Individual* interviews have been employed to document the role of the media in relation to people's personal biographies, the influence of the media on their understandings of the world, and experiences and pleasures as readers, viewers, or listeners. *Group* interviews, however, are particularly popular and have a long history within mass communication

research. They were used by sociologists during World War II, for example, to examine the impact of wartime propaganda (Merton, 1987). (For discussion of the history of this method within media studies, see Morrison, 1998.) Although focus groups became most closely associated with commercial research (as a quick way of generating new ideas), recently there has been a dramatic resurgence of academic interest in this method. It is now recognized as a potentially high-quality approach in its own right rather than a mere precursor to survey work. Indeed, group interviews are the cornerstone of much audience reception research (Lunt & Livingstone, 1996). Group discussions have been used extensively, for example, to examine the notion of “interpretive communities” and to explore diverse “readings” between groups from different classes, political perspectives, ethnic identities, or cultures, as well as in-depth studies of media influence. It is also used within research into media influence.

There is great variability, however, in the extent to which such studies fully exploit or take into account the key features of group work. It is here that the distinction between group interviews and *focus* groups becomes important. A group interview can only be defined as a *focus* group if the interaction between research participants is used both to generate data and as a focus of analysis (see Kitzinger, 1994). Group interviews are not focus groups if they are simply conducted as a convenient way to access several individuals simultaneously or if the group is used, in some quite static way, to represent certain sociodemographic characteristics (Jordin & Brunt, 1988). Unfortunately, the term *focus group* is often misappropriated in research reports in which there is a lack of attention, for example, to how the group operates as a group. At a very basic level, for example, researchers often fail to present even a single example of dialogue *between* participants. (For a full discussion of focus group methods, see Barbour & Kitzinger, 1999.)

Focus group research, which pays attention to interaction, can be very fruitful within studies of audiences. Such research can explore the negotiation of meaning, the sharing and building up of collective memories, the operation of dispute and consensus, and the performance of cultural repertoires. Groups’ conveners sometimes aim to simulate naturally occurring conversation to identify the mediating processes via which mass media products enter culture (Liebes & Katz, 1990). They are used to explore how people discuss political or social issues, as well as how this relates to media frames, and to examine how particular programs or genres provide resources for thinking about issues ranging from racism to cancer (Gamson, 1992; Henderson & Kitzinger, 1999; Jhally & Lewis, 1992; Miller et al., 1998).

Interaction between research participants allows researchers to study how people respond to each other’s perspectives and mobilize or resist media accounts in debate with one another. The unstable and dynamic processes within group discussions can propel researchers away from simplistic ideas about fixed attitudes and towards reflection on social processes. Focus group work can also generate very diverse types of talk—jokes, gossip, songs, anecdotes—all important forms of communication that help to illuminate how media messages are received, resisted, transmogrified, and incorporated into everyday exchanges. For example, focus groups on AIDS highlighted the importance of the “cultural currency” of media information (Kitzinger, 1993). This was illuminated by tracking how tales of “vengeful AIDS carriers” were used in group discussions and by exploring the circulation of “yuck” information about HIV risks from saliva (“you’d need to bathe in it, covered in open sores”). Another major research project using focus groups (this time discussing social work issues) highlighted the importance of high-profile “template” events in public debate. This research showed how journalists and their audiences used thumbnail sketches of previous scandals

about social work intervention to inform how they respond to more recent events in the news (Kitzinger, 2000, 2004).

The relationship between media representations and collective or individual experience is a key question in debates about media influence. It is often argued, for example, that personal experience of a phenomenon decreases media power to shape perceptions. Focus group methods offer the opportunity to explore the relationship between private and public/media discourses. Researchers can use focus groups (especially if combined with interviews or questionnaires) to identify how individual experience and identity relate to the collective, exploring what is shared and withheld from the group. Where the dynamics of the discussion prompt new revelations, then researchers can identify how this influences the trajectory of debate. The focus groups I conducted on child sexual abuse allowed me to explore the impact of personal revelations within the group and identify how a media focus on stranger danger meshed with everyday exchanges (e.g., outside the school gate) about threatening outsiders (Kitzinger, 2004). Focus group work in this area has also highlighted how media messages can interact with and transform individual and collective understandings (Kitzinger & Farquhar, 1999).

OBSERVATION AND ETHNOGRAPHY

Direct observation of people as they go about their normal business—going to the cinema, listening to radio, watching television, using the Internet—is another very important research strategy for those wishing to understand audiences. Here the aim is to minimize intervention from the researcher, avoid problems of self-report data, and gain direct access to how people interact with and around the media texts and technologies. This technique does not isolate an issue or a program for discussion; rather, it examines everyday consumption in social context within the flow of actual practices. It is

particularly used by those interested in the domestic consumption of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in the home. However, observation can also be carried out at school or work, in a cyber-café, and at public events such as a religious rally conducted by American evangelist Billy Graham (Lang & Lang, 1991) or mourners at Princess Diana's funeral ("The Death of Diana," 1998). Observation is, however, often positioned within a broader ethnographic approach rather than being a data collection technique by itself.

Ethnography is a research approach that relies heavily on observation but can also incorporate a variety of (usually qualitative) methods. Drawing on perspectives developed by anthropologists such as Malinowski, audience ethnographies aim to produce deep, rich, and "thick" descriptions of how people relate to the media in their day-to-day lives. Ethnography is a way of understanding social life in holistic terms. Combining intensive observational fieldwork with interviews and group discussions, ethnographies present "audiencehood" through the eyes of the research participants, insofar as this is possible without reproducing a "colonial gaze" (Young, 1996). Linked to grounded theory, the ethnographer seeks to unravel the familiar and taken for granted and must be constantly open to being surprised by her or his data (an injunction that one hopes, however, would apply to any research). The aim is to locate patterns and the "informal logic of everyday life" (Geertz, 1973) but not to impose predetermined categories. Ethnographers are thus often more concerned about internal validity and situated representativeness than statistical significance. Where surveys segregate and decontextualize individual acts, the ethnographic approach insists that being an audience (or "doing audiencing" or "consuming technologies") should not be abstracted from its social context. Indeed, many of those interested in studying culture have been drawn to audience research (and vice versa) precisely because "the all-pervasive and symbiotic relationship between media and

culture makes it impossible to analyse one in isolation from the other” (Johnson, 2001, p. 147). Research into audiences is certainly not confined to the moment of encounter with texts—it can include how people purchase and position technologies, interact around the television set, and talk about the media. As Gillespie (1995) argues,

TV talk, though it may often seem esoteric and trivial, is an important form of self-narration and a major collective resource through which identities are negotiated. Ethnographic fieldwork makes it possible to document and analyse the forms, contents and implications of such talk as a ritualistic form of everyday interaction, whether in front of the TV set or elsewhere. (p. 205)

In practice, some so-called “audience ethnographies” fail to deliver either the intensity of involvement or the depth of analysis and reflexivity required to live up to the anthropological heritage of this term (for a critique, see Nightingale, 1989). However, ethnographic approaches have been fruitfully employed to explore communities of romance readers (Radway, 1984), how media technologies are integrated into the home (e.g., Lull, 1990; Morley & Silverstone, 1990), and how diasporic communities use television and video to recreate cultural traditions and create cultural change (Gillespie, 1995). It is also often the approach of choice among anthropologists interested in the impact of media technologies and texts as they penetrate different parts of the world. Such studies include a phenomenology of the media practices of Islamist women in Egypt (Werner, 2001); a study of radio, everyday life, and development in South India (Jayaprakash, 2000); and the modernizing influences of television in rural India (Johnson, 2001). New forms of ethnography are also now emerging as researchers develop techniques for studying Internet communities located in virtual, rather than geographical, space (Hine, 2000; Lindlof & Shatzer, 1998).

VIDEO VIEWING, SCRIPTWRITING EXERCISES, AND OTHER GAMES

Any of the above approaches can be combined with innovative ways of inviting people to think about, express, and reflect on their encounters with media texts and technologies. Morley and Silverstone’s (1991) ethnography of domestic consumption included inviting research participants to complete time-use diaries, talk the researchers through their family photo albums, and draw mental maps of their household. Gray (1987) had her research participants color code their instruments of domestic technology (blue for masculine, pink for feminine). Showing videos to groups and inviting discussion have been used extensively to explore interpretation but have their limitations (see Morley, 1980, 1986). An alternative interesting array of games and exercises has been designed to explore people’s specific engagement with media narratives, information, and messages. Much of the audience reception work by the Glasgow University Media Group involved scriptwriting exercises—in which research participants attempt to reproduce news bulletins or soap opera dialogue using still pictures taken from the TV screen (see Kitzinger, 1990; Philo, 1990). Other researchers have developed techniques such as having focus groups edit their own news bulletins or involving research participants in making their own videos (Gauntlett, 1997; MacGregor & Morrison, 1995). There is no space to outline such methods in detail here, but they have proved an invaluable complement to some of the data collection techniques discussed above.

EXPERIMENTAL RESEARCH

Experimental audience research involves studying controlled variables to test their effect. Such research is most closely associated with laboratory research into the impact of violence in the media (Bandura et al., 1963). However, experimental designs

have been used to explore other theories, too. Iyengar and Kinder (1987) introduced an experimental approach to agenda-setting research in their study *News That Matters: Television and American Public Opinion*. They presented research participants with videotapes of television news broadcasts that had been altered by inserting extra news coverage of specific issues. Similar experimental approaches have been taken to examine the impact of “framing” (Price, Tewksbury, & Powers, 1997), test out cultivation theory (Rossler & Brosius, 2001), or explore how audiences view online news stories depending on the sources that they think have selected them (Sundar & Nass, 2001).

MULTILEVEL AND LONGITUDINAL RESEARCH

Any research is a snapshot in time and space, prioritizing an examination of some processes at the expense of others. However, understandings of the communication process can be increased by research that combines audience reception work (decoding) with studies of media content and production (encoding). (See, for example, the study of AIDS conducted by Miller et al., 1998.) Longitudinal work can also be invaluable. My own initial interviews with child sexual abuse survivors were conducted before the media “discovered” the issue. Comparing these early interviews with subsequent interviews with survivors a decade later provided insights into the media’s role in constructing and transforming identities (Kitzinger, 2001, 2004). A longitudinal research design can be even more powerful when researchers go back to the *same* research participants. Reilly, for example, conducted focus groups in the early 1990s to explore how people in the United Kingdom made sense of mad cow disease. A few years later (1996), the mad cow crisis hit Britain with the admission that BSE could be linked with Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (CJD).

Reilly was able to reconvene 13 of her initial 26 groups and explore their reassessment of the media coverage and their own views in light of such changes (Reilly, 1999).

HISTORICAL RESEARCH

Historical studies of audiences allow for even greater depth of insight into how meanings and practices have changed over time. Historians of “audiencehood” have been interested in issues such as the constitution of audiences for books, penny newspapers, or early cinema and the way in which reading, viewing, or listening was experienced. They have also explored how the media might interact with the creation of new forms of identity. Repeat focus groups or in-depth ethnographies, however, are rarely an option for those interested in such questions. Shifts within living memory can be accessed through interviewing people who were around at the time. Van Zoonen and Wieten (1994), for example, interviewed older people about the introduction of television into Dutch society in the 1950s. Beyond this, the historian is restricted to written and pictorial sources. This can include gleaning from editors’ claims about their readers or from contemporary diaries or drawing on old mass-observation studies (e.g., Harper & Porter’s [1996] study of crying in the cinema). Historians have documented family library holdings, newspaper subscriptions, and bookstore inventories and even examined how reading is illustrated in paintings (Darnton, cited in Schudson, 1991). Other data include archived letters to newspaper editors or radio broadcasters or fan letters to film producers (Nord, 1995; Ryfe, 2001; Stacey, 1994). Historians may need to be eclectic in their approach. Ehrenreich, Hess, and Jacobs (1992), in their work on “Beatlemania,” for example, construct their argument using a variety of sources, including women’s recollections of being Beatles fans, magazine articles, television

viewing figures, a Gallup Poll, and quotes from DJs of the time. Other historians focus on specific types of viewers. Staiger, for example, analyzed comments by film critics (as a very specialized audience) in the 1920s and argued that they developed an aesthetic based as much on a film's expression of hyperpatriotic nationalist positions as on categories such as narrative or visual style (Staiger, cited in Smoodin, 1996).

◆ *Reflections and Conclusion*

The above discussion has offered a whistle-stop tour through audience research methods. This chapter is not intended to offer a "how-to" guide but, rather, introduces a range of approaches to this complex area of study. Readers wishing to learn more about specific research techniques will need to follow up specialist literature. I have also not touched on the broader debates about ethics, politics, and epistemology. Implicit in many of the approaches above are different models of what counts as meaningful knowledge and diverse ideas about how researchers can or should "represent" research participants. For each approach, there are also, of course, radically different ways of analyzing and presenting data (or, indeed, diverse degrees to which scholars place value on empirical data at all). Those debates are beyond the scope of the present chapter.

What I hope I have achieved is to introduce some of the strands running through the web of audience research. If nothing else, I hope to have highlighted the interconnection between theories about audiences, whom we study, how we study, and the questions we pursue. It is through conscious reflection on these interconnections, as well as awareness of alternative approaches, that understanding can be deepened and innovation developed.

◆ *Note*

1. A term used in Britain in the popular press to denote videos depicting extreme acts of violence supposedly perpetrated in real life.

◆ *References*

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