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Audience Theory and Research Traditions

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This chapter begins with a discussion of the origins of the audience concept, which has a number of different meanings and manifestations. Different types of audience are identified. The main issues that have guided audience theory are explained and the purposes of audience research outlined. A typology of audiences is proposed as a framework of analysis. The question of relations between media communicators and their audiences, actual or imagined, is addressed. The chapter continues with a discussion of various measures of media reach and concludes with an assessment of ideas about audience selectivity and different types and degrees of activity.

The Audience Concept

The word 'audience' is very familiar as the collective term for the 'receivers' in the simple sequential model of the mass communication process (source, channel, message, receiver, effect) that was deployed by pioneers in the field of media research (e.g. see Schramm, 1955). It is a term that is understood by media practitioners as well as theorists and is recognized by media users as an unambiguous description of themselves. Nevertheless, beyond common-sense usage, there is much room for differences of meaning and theoretical disputes. These stem mainly from the fact that a single word is being applied to an increasingly diverse and complex reality, open to alternative and competing formulations. It has been suggested that 'what is occurring is the breakdown of the *referent* for the word audience in communication research from both the humanities and the social sciences' (Biocca, 1988a: 103). In other words, we keep the familiar word, but the thing itself is disappearing.

To start with, the audience concept implies an attentive, receptive but relatively passive set of listeners or spectators assembled in a more or less public setting. The actual reception of mass media is a varied and messy experience with little regularity and does not match this version. This is especially so in a time of mobility, individualization and multiplicity of media usage. Secondly, the rise of new media has introduced entirely new forms of behaviour, involving interactivity and searching, rather than watching or listening. Thirdly, the line between the producers and audiences has become blurred for reasons given earlier (see p.333).

Audiences are both a product of social context (which leads to shared cultural interests, understandings and information needs) and a response to a particular pattern of media provision. Often they are both at the same time, as when a medium sets out to appeal to the members of a social category or the residents of a certain place. Media use also reflects broader patterns of time use, availability, lifestyle and everyday routines.

An audience can thus be defined in different and overlapping ways: by *place* (as in the case of local media); by *people* (as when a medium is characterized by an appeal to a certain age group, gender, political belief or income category); by the particular type of *medium* or *channel* involved (technology and organization combined); by the *content* of its messages (genres, subject matter, styles); by *time* (as when one speaks of the 'daytime' or 'primetime' audience, or an audience that is fleeting and short term compared with one that endures).

There are other ways of characterizing the different kinds of audience that have emerged with changing media and changing times. Nightingale (2003) offers a new typology that captures key features of the new diversity, proposing four types as follows:

- *Audience as 'the people assembled'*. Essentially the aggregate measured as paying attention to a given media presentation or product at a given time. These are the known 'spectators'.
- *Audience as 'the people addressed'*. Referring to the group of people imagined by the communicator and for whom content is shaped. This is otherwise known as the 'inscribed' or 'interpellated' audience (see p. 386).
- *Audience as 'happening'*. The experience of reception alone or with others as an interactive event in daily life, contextualized by place and other features.
- *Audience as 'hearing' or 'audition'*. Essentially refers to participatory audience experience, when the audience is embedded in a show or is enabled to participate by remote means or to provide a response at the same time.

There are some other possibilities for defining a distinctive kind of audience, depending on the medium concerned and the perspective adopted. The Internet provides for new kinds of communicative relations that do not fit the typologies created for mass communication.

The Original Audience

The early origins of today's media audience lie in public theatrical and musical performances as well as in the games and spectacles of ancient times. Our earliest notions of audience are of a physical gathering in a certain place. A Greek or Roman city, for example, would have a theatre or arena, and it was no doubt preceded by less formal gatherings for similar events and for religious or state occasions. The original audience had many features that are familiar today in other areas of public performance, including those listed in Box 15.1.

Characteristics of the original audience 15.1

- 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 experience
- Voluntary, individual acts of choice and attention
- Specialization of roles of authors, performers and spectators
- Physical locatedness of performance and spectator experience

The audience as a set of spectators for public events of a secular kind was thus already institutionalized more than 2000 years ago. It had its own customs, rules and expectations about the time, place and content of performances, conditions for admission, and so forth. It was typically an urban phenomenon, often with a commercial basis, and content varied according to social class and status. Because of its public character, audience behaviour was subject to surveillance and social control.

The modern mass-media audience shares some of these features but is also very different in some obvious ways. The audiences for mass media are much more diverse, in terms of content available and the social behaviour involved. There is no element of public assembly. The audience remains in a state of continuous existence, rather than reforming occasionally for specific performances. The mass-media audience attracts a supply of content to keep it satisfied instead of reforming in response to some periodic performance of interest. The more one thinks about it, the less relevant the original concept appears to be. In several linguistic cultures other than English, the term 'public' is conventionally used rather than 'audience', but this too has a number of similar limitations, including the fact that much media use is not at all public in the primary meaning of this term.

From Mass to Market

Although many observers commented on the amazing new possibilities for reaching so many disparate people so quickly by the press, film or radio, the first theoretical formulation of the media audience concept stemmed from a wider consideration of the changing nature of social life in modern society. As recounted in Chapter 3, Herbert Blumer (1939) first provided an explicit framework in which the audience could be exemplified as a new form of collectivity made possible by the conditions of modern societies. He called this phenomenon a 'mass' and differentiated it from older social forms – especially the group, the crowd and the public (see pp. 56–8).

The mass audience was large, heterogeneous and widely dispersed, and its members did not and could not know each other. This view of the mass audience is less a description of reality than an accentuation of features typical of conditions of mass production and distribution of news and entertainment. When used by early commentators, the term generally had a pejorative connotation, reflecting a negative view of popular taste and mass culture.

Rediscovery of the audience as a group

The inadequacy of this concept of audience has long been apparent. The reality of people's experience of mass print and film was always very diverse. While impersonality, anonymity and vastness of scale might describe the phenomenon in general, much actual audience experience is personal, small-scale and integrated

into social life and familiar ways. Many media operate in local environments and are embedded in local cultures. Since most people make their own media choices freely, they do not typically feel manipulated by remote powers. The social interaction that develops around media use helps people to incorporate it into everyday life as a friendly rather than an alienating presence. At an early point in the history of media research, actual audiences were shown to consist of many overlapping networks of social relations based on locality and common interests, and the 'mass' media were incorporated into these networks in different ways (Delia, 1987). The communal and social group character of audiences was restored to conceptual prominence (e.g. Merton, 1949; Janowitz, 1952; Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955). Critical thinkers (e.g. Gitlin, 1978) objected that this supposed protection of the individual from manipulation was in itself an ideological move to obscure the much more typical vulnerability of the individual in the mass and allay fears of mass society.

Audience as market

The press and film were already established as very profitable businesses when broadcasting made its uncertain appearance on the scene in the 1920s. The radio and television audience rapidly developed into an important consumer market for hardware and software. At first sight, the widely used expression 'media market' seems to offer a more objective alternative to other, more value-laden terms to describe the audience phenomenon. As the media have become bigger business, the term 'market' has gained in currency. It can designate regions served by media, social-demographic categories, or the actual or potential consumers of particular media services or products. It may be defined as an aggregate of actual or potential consumers of media services and products, with a known social-economic profile.

While the market concept is a pragmatic and necessary one for media industries and for analysing media economics, it is also problematic and not really value-free. It treats an audience as a set of consumers rather than as a group or public. It links sender and receiver in a 'calculative' rather than a normative or social relationship, as a cash transaction between producer and consumer rather than a communication relationship. It ignores the internal social relations between individuals since these are of little interest to service providers. It privileges social-economic criteria and focuses on media *consumption* rather than reception.

Effective communication and the quality of audience experience are of secondary importance in market thinking. The significance of audience experience for the wider public sphere is also de-emphasized. The view of audience as market is inevitably the view 'from the media' (especially of their owners and managers), and within the terms of the media industries' discourse. People in audiences do not normally have any awareness of themselves as belonging to markets, and the market discourse in relation to the audience is implicitly manipulative.

In an innovative and sophisticated move, the Canadian Dallas Smythe (1977) gave birth to the theory that audiences actually *work* for advertisers (thus, for their ultimate oppressors). They do so by giving their free time to watch media, with this labour then packaged and sold by the media to advertisers as a new kind of 'commodity'. The whole system of commercial television and the press rests on this extraction of surplus value from an economically exploited audience. The same audience has to pay yet again for its media, by way of the extra cost added to the advertised goods. It was an ingenious and convincing piece of theorizing which revealed the mass audience phenomenon in quite a new light (see Jhally and Livant, 1986). It is plausible to suppose that the media need their audience more than audiences need their media, and there is also reason to view audience research as primarily a tool for the close control and management (call it manipulation) of media audiences.

This line of argument is, in some respects, even more applicable to the Internet-based media that are almost entirely financed by advertising and also (perhaps for that reason) require a good deal more 'work' from their users than simply attending to advertisements, in the form of self-produced content (see p. 393). A new political economic interpretation along these lines has been provided by Fuchs (2009). However, Dallas Smythe's argument has also been questioned by Bermejo (2009), mainly on the grounds that it is not very clear just what is being produced and sold. It is not the attention and time of an audience in a conventional sense. Essentially, this had first to be converted into 'ratings', based on time spent. However, the same time-based ratings system does not apply to the Internet. In some respects, the Internet user does work much harder than the passive watcher of television, but it is not clear who benefits from this work. Bermejo suggests that in the case of search engines, it is not the watching time of audiences that is sold to advertisers, but words.

With respect to television, the media industry is routinely transforming the actual television audience into a piece of commercial information called 'ratings' (Ang, 1991). Ratings are described as forming 'the basis for the agreed-upon standard by which advertisers and networks buy and sell the audience commodity' (1991: 54). Ang reminds us that 'watching television is an ongoing, day-to-day cultural practice engaged in by millions of people' and the 'ratings discourse' serves to 'capture and encompass the viewing practice of all these people in a singular, objectified, streamlined construct of "television audience"'. These comments essentially label the industry view of the audience as intrinsically dehumanizing and exploitative. Again, it reflects the view that commercial mass media are served by their audiences rather than vice versa. Ang (1991) argued that media institutions have no real interest in *knowing* their audiences, only in being able to prove they exist by way of systems and techniques of measurement (e.g. 'people meters') which convince their clients but which can never begin to capture the true essence of 'audiencehood'. Much the same critique applies to the Internet, where ratings are also pursued assiduously, albeit in new and even more detailed terms. The main theoretical features of the audience as market are reviewed in Box 15.2.

The audience as a market: main theoretical features 15.2

- Audiences are aggregates of many potential or actual consumers
- Members are unrelated to each other and have no shared identity of their own
- Boundaries assigned to audiences are based mainly on socio-economic criteria
- Audiences are objects of management and control by media providers
- The formation is temporary
- Public significance is subordinate
- Relations of audience with media are mutually calculative, not moral

Goals of Audience Research

Since the audience has always been a contested category, it is not surprising that the purposes of doing research into audiences are varied and often inconsistent. All research shares the general characteristic that it helps to 'construct', 'locate' or 'identify' an otherwise amorphous, shifting or unknowable social entity (Allor, 1988). But the methods used, the constructions of the audience arrived at, and the uses to which they are put all diverge considerably. Leaving aside the purpose of theory building, we can classify research goals in terms of the main uses to which information about the audience can be put. These are shown in Box 15.3.

Varied goals of audience research 15.3

Media-centred goals

- Measuring actual and potential reach for purposes of book-keeping and advertising (sales and ratings)
- Managing audience choice behaviour
- Looking for new audience market opportunities
- Product testing and improving effectiveness from the perspective of the sender

Audience-centred goals

- Meeting responsibilities to serve an audience
- Evaluating media performance from an audience perspective
- Charting audience motives for choice and use
- Uncovering audience interpretations of meaning
- Exploring the context of media use
- Assessing actual effects on audiences

Perhaps the most fundamental division of purpose is that between media industry goals and those that take the perspective and 'side' of the audience. Research can, as it were, represent the voice of the audience, or speak on its behalf. Although it is not at all sure that audience research can ever truly serve the audience alone, we can provisionally view the different purposes of research as extending along a dimension ranging from audience control to audience autonomy. This division approximates to that shown in Box 15.3. Eastman (1998) has sketched the history of audience research as a permanent tug-of-war between the media industry seeking to manage audience behaviour, and people seeking to satisfy their media needs.

By far the greatest quantity of audience research belongs to the control end of the spectrum, since this is what the industry wants and pays for (Beniger, 1986; Eastman, 1998). Few of the results of industry research appear in the public domain, and they are consequently neglected in academic accounts of the audience. Curiously enough, according to Eastman, scholarly research on the audience has made no impact on the media industry. Despite this overall imbalance and general disconnection of research effort, the clearest line of development in audience theory has been a move away from the perspective of the media communicator and towards that of the receiver. It seems as if the media industry has also accepted this as a pragmatic trend as a result of the steadily increasing competition for audience attention. Accounts of audience research have increasingly tended to emphasize the 'rediscovery' of people, in the sense of recognizing that the initiative for choice, interpretation and response lies primarily much more with receivers than with senders, and the notion of an active and obstinate audience in the face of attempted manipulation. The preferences of audiences are still the driving forces of media use.

Alternative Traditions of Research

For present purposes, it is convenient to identify three main traditions of research, under the headings 'structural', 'behavioural' and 'social-cultural'.

The structural tradition of audience measurement

The needs of media industries gave rise to the earliest and simplest kinds of research, which were designed to obtain reliable estimates of what were otherwise unknown quantities. These were especially the size and reach of radio audiences and the 'reach' of print publications (the number of potential readers as opposed to the circulation or print run). These data were essential to management, especially for gaining paid advertising. In addition to size, it was important to know about the social composition of audiences in basic terms – the who and where of the audience. These elementary needs gave rise to an immense industry interconnected with that of advertising and market research.

The behavioural tradition: media effects and media uses

Early mass communication research was mainly preoccupied with media effects, especially on children and young people and with an emphasis on potential harm. Nearly every serious effects study has also been an audience study, in which the audience is conceptualized as 'exposed' to influence or impact, whether of a persuasive, learning or behavioural kind. The typical effects model was a one-way process in which the audience was conceived as an unwitting target or a passive recipient of media stimuli. The second main type of 'behavioural' audience research was in many ways a reaction from the model of direct effects. Media use was now central, and the audience was viewed as a more or less active and motivated set of media users/consumers, who were 'in charge' of their media experience, rather than passive 'victims'. Research focused on the origin, nature and degree of motives for choice of media and media content. Audiences were also permitted to provide the definitions of their own behaviour (see Blumler and Katz, 1974). The 'uses and gratifications' approach is not strictly 'behavioural' since its main emphasis is on the social origins of media gratification and on the wider social functions of media, for instance in facilitating social contact and interaction or in reducing tension and anxiety.

The cultural tradition and reception analysis

The cultural studies tradition occupies a borderland between social science and the humanities. It has been almost exclusively concerned with works of popular culture, in contrast to an early literary tradition. It emphasizes media use as a reflection of a particular social-cultural context and as a process of giving meaning to cultural products and experiences in everyday life. This school of research rejects both the stimulus-response model of effects and the notion of an all-powerful text or message. It involves a view of media use as in itself a significant aspect of 'everyday life'. Media reception research emphasized the deep study of audiences as 'interpretative communities' (Lindlof, 1988). Drotner (2000) characterizes audience ethnography by three main features: it looks at a group of people rather than the media or content; it follows the group in different locations; and it stays long enough to avoid preconceptions. Reception analysis is effectively the audience research arm of modern cultural studies, rather than an independent tradition.

The main features of the culturalist (reception) tradition of audience research can be summarized as follows (though not all are exclusive to this approach):

- The media text has to be 'read' through the perceptions of its audience, which constructs meanings and pleasures from the media texts offered (and these are never fixed or predictable).
- The very process of media use and the way in which it unfolds in a particular context are central objects of interest.
- Media use is typically situation-specific and oriented to social tasks which evolve out of participation in 'interpretative communities' (Lindlof, 1988).

	<i>Structural</i>	<i>Behavioural</i>	<i>Cultural</i>
<i>Main aims</i>	Describe composition; enumerate; relate to society	Explain and predict choices, reactions, effects	Understand meaning of content received and of use in context
<i>Main data</i>	Social-demographic, media and time use	Motives; acts of choice; reactions	Perceptions of meaning regarding social and cultural context
<i>Main methods</i>	Survey and statistical analysis	Survey; experiment; mental measurement	Ethnographic; qualitative

Figure 15.1 Three audience research traditions compared

- Audiences for particular media genres often comprise separate 'interpretative communities' which share much the same forms of discourse and frameworks for making sense of media.
- Audiences are never passive, nor are all their members equal, since some will be more experienced or more active fans than others.
- Methods have to be 'qualitative' and deep, often ethnographic, taking account of content, act of reception and context together.

The three traditions are summarily compared in Figure 15.1.

There are some indications of increasing convergence in research approaches (Schröder, 1987; Curran, 1990), especially in the combination of quantitative and qualitative methods. Large differences in underlying philosophy and conceptualization remain between the alternative schools, although increasing attention is being given to methodological issues raised by qualitative audience research (Barker, 2003; Hoijer, 2008).

Audience Issues of Public Concern

This brief review of alternative research approaches helps us to identify the main issues and problems that have shaped thinking and research about mass media audiences, aside from the obvious practical need to have basic information about the audience. As we will see, the transformation of a straight question about the audience into an 'issue' or a social problem normally requires the injection of some value judgements, as described in the following paragraphs.

Media use as addiction

'Excessive' media use has often been viewed as harmful and unhealthy (especially for children), leading to addiction, dissociation from reality, reduced social contacts, diversion from education and displacement of more worthwhile activities.

Television has been the most usual suspect, but previously films and comics were regarded similarly, while video games, computers and the Internet have become the latest perpetrators.

The mass audience and social atomization

The more an audience is viewed as an aggregate of isolated individuals rather than a social group, the more it can be considered as a mass with the associated negative features of irrationality, lack of normative self-control and vulnerability to manipulation. In a curious reversal of this fear of the mass, it has been argued that the contemporary fragmentation of the audience poses a new threat of loss of national cohesion, following the decline of central broadcasting institutions.

Audience behaviour as active or passive

In general, active is regarded as good and passive as bad, whether for children or adults. The media are criticized for offering mindless and soporific entertainment instead of original and stimulating content. The results are found, for instance, in escapism and diversion from social participation. Alternatively, the audience is criticized for choosing the easy path. While media use is by definition somewhat inactive, it can show signs of activity by way of selectivity, motivated attention and critical response.

Manipulation or resistance

Early formulations of the audience viewed it as readily available as an object of manipulation and control, open to suggestion and foolish in its adulation of media celebrity. The idea of an 'obstinate' audience was an early development in audience theory. Later, reception research emphasized the fact that audiences often have social and cultural roots and supports that protect them against unwanted influence and make for autonomy in choice and response to what they receive.

Minority audience rights

Inevitably, mass communication tends to work against the interests of small and minority audiences. An audience research project that is independent and people-centred should pay attention to the needs and interests of minorities by way of recognition and finding ways to promote their viability. In this context, minority covers a potentially wide range of factors, including gender, political dissent, locality, taste, age, ethnicity and much besides.

The implications of new media technology

Finally, there is the question of the future of the audience, especially in the light of changes in communication technology, making for abundance and interactivity (Livingstone, 2003). One proposition is that audiences (sets of users) will become more and more fragmented and atomized and lose their national, local or cultural identity. On the other hand, new kinds of integration based on interactivity may compensate for the loss of older forms of shared experience. More options for audience formation based on shared interests are available to more people and there could be greater freedom and choice.

Types of Audience

Audiences originate both in society and in media and their contents: either people stimulate an appropriate supply of content, or the media attract people to the content they offer. If we take the first view, we can consider media as responding to the needs of a national society, local community, pre-existing social group or some category of individuals that the media choose as a 'target group'. Alternatively, if we consider audiences as primarily created by the media, we can see that they are often brought into being by some new technology (as with the invention of film, radio or television) or they are attracted by some additional 'channel', such as a new magazine or radio station. In this case, the audience is defined by the media source (e.g. the 'television audience' or the 'readers of newspaper X') rather than by their shared characteristics.

The media are continuously seeking to develop and hold new audiences, and in doing so they anticipate what might otherwise be a spontaneous demand, or identify potential needs and interests which have not yet surfaced. In the continual flux of media audience formation and change, the sharp distinction made at the outset is not easy to demonstrate. Over time, media provision to pre-existing social groups has become hard to distinguish from media recruitment of social categories to the content offered. Media-created needs have also become indistinguishable from 'spontaneous' needs, or both have fused inextricably. Nevertheless, the theoretical distinction between receiver- and sender-created demand is a useful one for mapping out different versions of audience that have been introduced. The distinction is set out in Figure 15.2, first of all between society- and media-created needs and, secondly, between the different levels at which the process operates, namely macro or micro.

		Source	
		Society	Media
Level	Macro	Social group or public	Medium audience
	Micro	Gratification set	Channel or content audience

Figure 15.2 A typology of mass media audience formation

The four main types that are identified in Figure 15.2 are further described in the following sections.

The Audience as a Group or Public

Today, the most common example of a media audience which is also in some sense a social group is probably the readership of a local newspaper or the listener group of a community radio station. Here the audience shares at least one significant social/cultural identifying characteristic – that of shared space and membership of a residential community. Local media can contribute significantly to local awareness and sense of belonging (Janowitz, 1952; Stamm, 1985; McLeod et al., 1996; Rothenbuhler et al., 1996; Stamm et al., 1997). Local residence defines and maintains a wide range of media-relevant interests (e.g. leisure, environmental, work-related, social networks, etc.) and local media advertising serves local retail trade and labour markets as well as residents of the area. Social and economic forces together reinforce the integrative role of local media. Even if a local medium goes out of business, the local community that forms its audience will persist.

Beyond the case of local media, there are other circumstances where shared characteristics, relative homogeneity and stability of composition indicate the existence of some independent and group-like qualities in the audience. Newspapers are often characterized by readerships of varying political leaning, and readers express their political identity by their choice of paper as well as finding reinforcement for their beliefs. Newspapers and magazines may respond by shaping their contents and expressing opinions accordingly.

The conditions of society that militate against the formation of audiences as groups and publics include especially totalitarian government and very high levels of commercially monopolized media. In the first case, there is no autonomy for social groups; and in the second, audience members are treated as customers and consumers, but with little power in the media market to realize their diverse wants. There are some other relevant examples of audience groups and special publics. For example, the broad term 'radical' media (Downing, 2000) embraces a wide range of more or less oppositional media channels which can be considered to carry on the tradition of the early radical and party press, especially in developing countries. Many such media are 'micro-media', operating at grass-roots level, discontinuous, non-professional, sometimes persecuted or just illegal. The *samizdat* publications forbidden under communism, the opposition press in Pinochet's Chile, or the underground press of occupied Europe during the Second World War are well-known examples. The publics for such media are often small, but they are likely to be intensely committed. They usually have clear social and political goals. Less unusual and more enduring examples are provided by the many minority ethnic and linguistic publications and channels that have grown up in numerous countries to serve immigrant groups. New media have opened up new opportunities for the formation of very small audiences based on many different aims and identities and with the advantage of being able to serve very dispersed groups.

The Gratification Set as Audience

The term 'gratification set' is chosen to refer to multiple possibilities for audiences to form and re-form on the basis of some media-related interest, need or preference. The use of the word 'set' implies that such audiences are typically aggregates of dispersed individuals, without mutual ties. While the audience as 'public' often has a wide range of media needs and interests, and derives its unity from shared social characteristics, the 'gratification set' is identified by a particular need or type of need (which may, nevertheless, derive from social experience). To a certain degree, this type of audience has gradually supplanted the older kind of public, the result of differentiation of media production and supply to meet distinctive consumer demands. Instead of each public (whether based on place, social class, religion or party) having its own dedicated medium, many self-perceived needs have stimulated their own corresponding supply.

The phenomenon is not new since popular newspapers, as well as gossip, fashion and 'family' magazines, have long catered for a diverse range of specific but overlapping audience interests. More recently, the range of interests covered has widened, with each type of medium (film, book, magazine, radio, phonogram, etc.) packaging its potential audience appeal in a variety of ways. The sets of readers/viewers/listeners that result from a highly differentiated and 'customized' supply are unlikely to have any sense of collective identity, despite some shared social-demographic characteristics.

* Relevant here is the concept of 'taste culture' which was coined by Herbert Gans (1957) to describe something like the audience brought into being by the media based on a convergence of interests, rather than on shared locality or social background. He defined it as 'an aggregate of similar content chosen by the same people' (in Lewis, 1981: 204). Taste cultures are less sets of people than sets of similar media products – an outcome of form, style of presentation and genre which are intended to match the lifestyle of a segment of the audience. The more this happens, the more there is likely to be a distinctive social-demographic profile of a taste culture.

Research in the tradition of 'media uses and gratifications' has shed light on the nature of the underlying audience demands and on the way in which they are structured. The motivations expressed for choice of media content and the ways in which this content is interpreted and evaluated by the audience point to the existence of a fairly stable and consistent structure of demand. These points are taken up in Chapter 16.

The Medium Audience

The third version of the audience concept (Figure 15.2) is the one that identifies it by the choice of a particular type of medium – as in the 'television audience' or the 'cinema-going public'. The earliest such usage was in the expression the 'reading public' – the small minority who could and did read books when literacy was not very common. The reference is usually to those whose behaviour or self-perception identifies them as regular and attracted 'users' of the medium concerned.

Each medium – newspaper, magazine, cinema, radio, television, phonogram – has had to establish a new set of consumers or devotees, and the process continues with the diffusion of 'new media' such as the Internet or multimedia. It is not especially problematic to locate relevant sets of people in this way, but the further characterization of these audiences is often crude and imprecise, based on broad social-demographic categories.

This type of audience is close to the idea of a 'mass audience' as described above (p. 400), since it is often very large, dispersed and heterogeneous, with no internal organization or structure. It also corresponds to the general notion of a 'market' for a particular kind of consumer service. By now, most such audiences are so overlapping that there is little differentiation involved, except in terms of subjective affinity and relative frequency or intensity of use. The audience for any one mass medium is often identical with the audience for another.

The audience continues to distinguish between media according to their particular social uses and functions or according to their perceived advantages and disadvantages. Media have fairly distinctive images (Perse and Courtright, 1992). Research has shown that some media are substitutable for each other for certain purposes, while others have distinctive uses (Katz et al., 1973). Competition between different media for audience and advertising income is intense and these differences play a part. The 'medium audience' is an important concept for those who want to use the media for purposes of advertising and other campaigns, despite the lack of exclusivity. A key decision in advertising is often that concerning the 'media mix' – the division of an advertising budget between the alternatives, taking into account the characteristics of each medium, the audience it reaches and the conditions of reception.

In media economics, the issue of media *substitutability* continues to be important and often turns on the extent to which distinctive medium audiences persist (Picard, 1989). Several considerations come into play, aside from the questions of audience size and demographics. Some messages are best delivered in a domestic or family context, indicating a choice of television, while others may be individual and more *risqué*, indicating posters or magazines. Some may be appropriate in an informational context, others against a background of relaxation and entertainment. From this perspective, the medium audience as target is chosen not only on the basis of socio-economic characteristics, but with reference to typical content carried and the social-cultural associations and context of the media behaviours concerned.

The familiar division of the media landscape according to media type is yet another casualty of the rise of the Internet and other multimedia platforms. There is really no 'Internet audience' as such, in any meaningful sense, although it is possible to identify more or less intensive (even addicted) users and to classify use according to certain kinds of satisfaction obtained and in other ways.

Audience as Defined by Channel or Content

The identification of an audience as the readers, viewers or listeners of a *particular* book, author, film, newspaper title or television channel and programme is relatively

straightforward. It is the usage with which audience research in the 'book-keeping' tradition is most comfortable, and it seems to pose few problems of empirical measurement. There are no hidden dimensions of group relations or consciousness to take account of, no psychological variables of motivation that need to be measured. It is the audience in this very concrete sense on which the business of the media turns most of all. For this reason, specific content or channel has usually been privileged as a basis for defining audiences, especially in industry-related research.

This version of audience is also consistent with market thinking, according to which audiences are sets of consumers for particular media products. The audience consists either of paying customers, or of the heads and pockets delivered to advertisers per unit of media product and charged for accordingly. It is expressed as the 'ratings', the 'numbers' which are central to the media business. It provides the main criteria of success in any game of media politics, even where profit is not involved. Increasingly, it is the dominant meaning of the term 'audience', the only one with immediate practical significance and clear market value. It also involves a view of the audience as a *product* of the media – the first and indubitable *effect* of any medium.

This sense of audience is a valid one, but we cannot be limited to it. There are, for instance, audiences in the sense of 'followers' or fans of television or radio serials and series, which cannot be unambiguously measured. There are also audiences for particular films, books, songs and also for stars, writers and performers, which only accumulate over time to a significant number or proportionate reach. In addition, content is often identified by audience according to genres, usually within the boundaries of a given medium. All of these are relevant aspects of the audience experience, though they usually evade any but the most approximate measurement.

This brings us to the yet more complex question of fans and *fandom*. The term can refer to any set of extremely devoted followers of a media star or performer, performance or text (Lewis, 1992). They are usually identified by great, even obsessive attachment to their object of attraction. Often they show a strong sense of awareness and fellow-feeling with other fans. Being a fan also involves a pattern of supplementary behaviour, in dress, speech, other media use, consumption, and so on. The topic of fandom is discussed in Chapter 16, pp. 442–3.

Questions of Audience Reach

The least problematic version of the audience concept is probably that which underlies the 'ratings' in their various forms. Media providers need to know a great deal about the extent of media reach (which is at the same time a measure of audience attention), for reasons of finance or policy or for organization and planning. These concerns create a strong vested interest in the 'canonical audience' referred to by Biocca (1988b: 127). This concept derives from the theatre and cinema and refers to a physical body of identifiable and attentive 'spectators'. A belief in the existence of such an audience is essential to the routine operation of media and provides a shared goal for the media organization (Tunstall, 1971). The fact of having an audience, and

the right one as well, is a necessary condition of media organizational survival and it has to be continually demonstrated.

However, this requirement is less easy to meet than it seems because of the differences between media and different ways of defining the 'reach' of a given medium or message. Leaving intermedia differences aside, there are at least six relevant concepts of audience reach, as follows:

- the *available* (or potential) audience: all with the basic skills (e.g. literacy) and/or reception capability;
- the *paying* audience: those who actually pay for a media product, whether newspaper, film entrance, video rental, CD or book;
- the *attentive* audience: those who actually read, watch, listen, etc., to particular content;
- the *internal* audience: those who pay attention to particular sections, types or single items of content;
- the *cumulative* audience: the overall proportion of the potential audience that is reached over a particular period of time;
- the *target* audience: that section of a potential audience singled out for reach by a particular source (e.g. an advertiser).

There is also the question of listening or viewing as primary or secondary activity, since both can and do accompany other activities, radio more so than television. Conceptually, this is not very crucial, but it matters greatly for measurement (see Twyman, 1994). Other less conventional audiences can also be distinguished, for instance for outdoor billboards and video screens, direct mail, audiotext, telephone selling campaigns, and so on. The content and uses of old media also change. The terms and definitions presented here are not fixed. However, the principles of classification remain much the same and we can adapt these to new circumstances.

The basic features of audience reach, as viewed by the would-be communicator, are shown in Figure 15.3, derived from the work of the Belgian researcher Roger Clause (1968). Although this model was developed for the case of broadcasting, it can apply, in principle, to all mass media to cover most of the distinctions made above. The outer band represents the almost unlimited potential for the reception of broadcast messages. In effect, it equates audience with a near-universal distribution system. The second band indicates the realistic maximum limits which apply to reception; these delineate the *potential* media public, which is defined by residence in a geographical area of reception, and by possession of the necessary apparatus to receive, or the means to purchase or borrow publications, phonograms, video recordings, and the like. It is also determined by the degree of literacy and possession of other necessary skills.

The third band identifies another level of media public – the *actual* audience reached by a radio or television channel or programme or any other medium. This is what is usually measured by sales, admission and subscription figures, reading surveys and audience ratings (often expressed as a percentage of the potential audience), and so on. The fourth and the central band relates to the *quality* of attention, degree of impact and potential effect, some of which are empirically measurable. In practice, only a small fragment of the total of *actual* audience behaviour can ever be measured and the rest is extrapolation, estimate or guesswork.

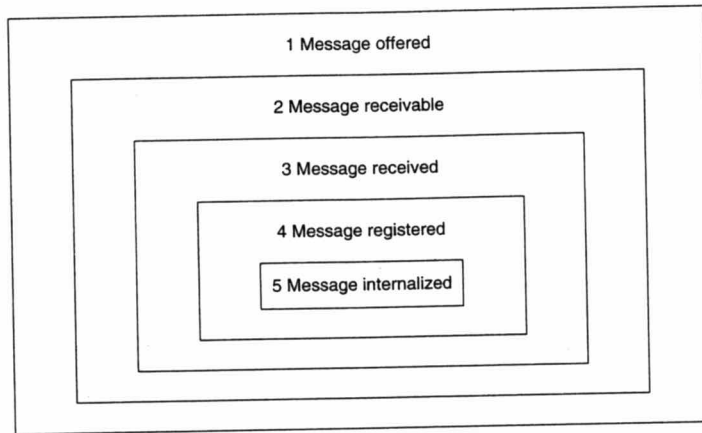


Figure 15.3 A schema of differential audience reach (Clausse, 1968)

From the point of view of the communicator, Figure 15.3 shows that there is a high degree of 'wastage' in mass communication, although this may not carry much extra cost. The question of differential reach and impact of mass media is of more than theoretical interest since it has to be taken into account in planning communication – especially in campaigns for commercial, political or informational ends (see Windahl et al., 1992). Most campaigns operate with a notion of a 'target group' (of voters, consumers, and the like) that becomes the audience which a campaign tries to reach.

Activity and Selectivity

Research into audience selectivity was originally stimulated by fears about the effects of mass communication. Critics of mass culture feared that a large and *passive* audience would be exploited and culturally harmed and that passive and unselective attention, especially by children, should be discouraged. In addition, the media, especially television, were thought to encourage passivity in children and adults alike (e.g. Himmelweit et al., 1958; Schramm et al., 1961). A distinction has been made between 'ritualized' and 'instrumental' patterns of use (Rubin, 1984). The former refers to habitual and frequent viewing by people with a strong affinity with the medium. Instrumental use is purposeful and selective, and thus more likely to qualify as active. Use of other media, especially radio, music and newspapers, can be similarly patterned. This version of the activity concept seems to imply that more active users are more sparing with their time.

The whole issue has also been defined in a normative way, with passivity as harmful, and active use of media as good. However, there are significant industry interests at

stake, since too much audience activity can be interpreted as trouble for those who seek to control the audience by manipulation of programming and by exploiting the routine character and inertia of much media use (Eastman, 1998).

There has continued to be controversy about how active the typical media audience really is and about what activity means. The extensive and detailed studies of time use by Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi (1991), based on self-reports, leave little doubt about the generally uninvolved and secondary character of television viewing, although this should not be confused with lack of significance. On the other hand, reading and film going are likely to be more personally involving.

Biocca (1988a) has reviewed the different meanings and concepts of *audience activity*, proposing five different versions that are to be found in the literature, as follows:

- *Selectivity*. We can describe an audience as active, the more that choice and discrimination are exercised in relation to media and content within media. This is mainly likely to show up in evidence of planning of media use and in consistent patterns of choice (including buying, renting or borrowing films or books). Very heavy media use (especially of television) is likely to be accounted as by definition 'unselective' and therefore inactive.
- *Utilitarianism*. Here the audience is the 'embodiment of the self-interested consumer'. Media consumption represents the satisfaction of some more or less conscious need, such as those postulated in the 'uses and gratifications' approach.
- *Intentionality*. An **active audience**, according to this definition, is one which engages in active cognitive processing of incoming information and experience. It is often implied by the various forms of subscription to media.
- *Resistance to influence*. Following the lines of the 'obstinate audience' concept (Bauer, 1964), the activity concept here emphasizes the limits set by members of the audience to unwanted influence or learning. The reader, viewer or listener remains 'in control' and unaffected, except as determined by personal choice.
- *Involvement*. In general, the more an audience member is 'caught up' or 'engrossed' in the ongoing media experience, the more we can speak of involvement. This can also be called 'affective arousal'. Involvement may also be indicated by such signs as 'talking back' to the television.

These different versions of the audience activity concept do not all relate to the same moment in the sequence of media exposure. As Levy and Windahl (1985) point out, they may relate to *advance* expectations and choice, or to activity *during* the experience, or to the *post-exposure* situation, for instance the transfer of satisfactions gained from the media to personal and social life (e.g. in conversation about media, or based upon media-derived topics).

There are some other aspects of active media use that may be missed by the five variants outlined. For instance, audience activity can take the form of direct response by letter or telephone, whether or not encouraged by the media. Local or community media, whether print or broadcast, may generally have more active audiences, or have more opportunity to do so. Critical reflection on media experience, whether openly expressed in 'feedback' or not, is another example of audience activity, as is conscious membership of a fan group or club.

In the case of television, audience appreciation ratings, which are either unusually high or low, often indicate the presence within a programme audience of a set of active viewers who respond very positively or very negatively. The act of recording and replaying from radio or television is another indication of above-average engagement. Finally, we can note the view, examined later in more detail, that audiences often participate in the media experience by giving meaning to it, thus actively *producing* the eventual media 'text' (Fiske, 1987, 1992).

The general notion of 'audience activity' is evidently an unsatisfactory concept. It is open to diverse definitions, its indicators are very mixed and ambiguous, and it means different things with different media. It is sometimes manifested in behaviour, but sometimes it is only a mentalistic construct (an attitude or feeling). According to Biocca, it is almost empty of meaning in general because it is *unfalsifiable*: 'It is, by definition, nearly impossible for the audience *not* to be active' (1988a: 59). This is even more true of interactive online media.

Conclusion

As we have seen, the apparently simple idea of an audience turns out to be quite complicated. The very concept is understood differently from quite different perspectives. For most of the media industry it is more or less the equivalent of a market for media services, and is categorized accordingly. From the point of view of the audience, or those who take the audience perspective, this view of an audience is peripheral or unrecognized. The audience experience as a social event or cultural event takes precedence. Being in an audience is often the outcome of quite varied motives. Yet other possibilities arise when the view of the sender or communicator is taken, in terms not of selling services but of trying to communicate meaning. Audiences may be thought of by communicators in terms of their tastes, interests, capacities or their social composition and their location. The situation is even more complicated by the arrival of new means of communication, with implications for many of the factors mentioned.

Further Reading

- Alasuutari, P. (ed.) (1999) *Rethinking the Media Audience*. London: Sage. Assembles a strong and varied collection of articles on the application of qualitative reception research.
- LaRose, R. and Estin, M.S. (2004) 'A social cognitive theory of internet use and gratifications: towards a new model of media attendance', *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media*, 48 (3): 358–77.
- This exploratory article sets out a number of relatively new kinds of gratification as offered by the Internet.
- Liebes, T. and Katz, E. (1990) *The Export of Meaning: Cross-cultural Readings of 'Dallas'*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Although not the first to demonstrate the alternative readings of popular television fiction, it was very influential on research, especially because it demonstrated such a clear cross-cultural dimension.

Rosengren, K.-E., Palmgreen, P. and Wenner, L. (eds) (1985) *Media Gratification Research: Current Perspectives*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Although it can no longer count as current, this collection of chapters on theory and research in the uses and gratifications tradition marks a high point and a useful source for reconsideration and rescue, where appropriate.

Ross, S.M. (2008) *Beyond the Box*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.

An exploration of the ways in which the coming of the Internet is changing the way television is viewed and especially the way in which fans participate in the experience and connect with each other. Main illustrations are with reference to *American Idol* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.

Online Readings

- Bakker, P. and Sadaba, C. (2008) 'The impact of the Internet on users', in S. Küng et al. (eds), *The Internet and the Mass Media*, pp. 86–101. London: Sage.
- Bermejo, F. (2009) 'Audience manufacture in historical perspective: from broadcasting to Google', *New Media and Society*, 11 (1/2): 133–154.
- Finn, S. (1997) 'Origins of media exposure: linking personality traits, TV radio, print and film use', *Communication research*, 24 (5): 507–29.
- Kitzinger, J. (2004) 'Audience and Readership research', in J.D.H. Downing, D. McQuail, P. Schlesinger and E. Wartella (eds), *The Sage Handbook of Media Studies*, pp. 167–82. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Vandebosch, H. (2000) 'A captive audience? The media use of prisoners', *European Journal of Communication*, 15 (4): 529–44.

