ISSUES in CULTURAL and MEDIA STUDIES

Karen Ross and Virginia Nightingale

Media and Audiences

New Perspectives

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SERIES EDITOR'S FOREWORD

'There are in fact no masses,' Raymond Williams once famously observed, 'only ways of seeing people as masses.' This notion of 'the masses', from the vantage point of today at least, seems strangely anachronistic. And yet, by a similar logic, what happens to certain familiar conceptions of 'the audience' when subjected to closer scrutiny? To render problematic 'the audience' as a singular, cohesive totality, is it not necessary to recognize that a multiplicity of audiences exist where typically only one is being acknowledged?

In *Media and Audiences*, Karen Ross and Virginia Nightingale explore precisely these sorts of thorny questions. In their view, the increasing centrality of mediated information in modern societies, together with the interactivity engendered by new media technologies, mean that there are unprecedented opportunities for innovative, highly engaging media experiences to emerge. Pertinent here, for example, are the ways in which some internet users pursue common goals, seek out information, track down contacts, and share ways to circumvent the rights of content producers, copyright holders and hardware suppliers. Creatively negotiated practices such as these ones, Ross and Nightingale contend, underscore the necessity of examining afresh certain longstanding assumptions about media audiences, and the academic concepts used to characterize their actions. Thus it is this book's aim – together with the accompanying text, *Critical Readings: Media and Audiences* – to provide a careful elucidation of several major strands of the research literature on audiences. Future lines of enquiry, Ross and Nightingale point out, will be empowered by an understanding of the history of the field, one which recognizes not only its advances, but also its limitations, gaps and silences.

The *Issues in Cultural and Media Studies* series aims to facilitate a diverse

range of critical investigations into pressing questions considered to be central to current thinking and research. In light of the remarkable speed at which the conceptual agendas of cultural and media studies are changing, the series is committed to contributing to what is an ongoing process of re-evaluation and critique. Each of the books is intended to provide a lively, innovative and comprehensive introduction to a specific topical issue from a fresh perspective. The reader is offered a thorough grounding in the most salient debates indicative of the book's subject, as well as important insights into how new modes of enquiry may be established for future explorations. Taken as a whole, then, the series is designed to cover the core components of cultural and media studies courses in an imaginatively distinctive and engaging manner.

Stuart Allan

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

When we began the planning of this book – which now seems an awfully long time ago – we realized that we had both been teaching and researching audiences for almost all our academic lives. We also realized that we still had things to say about our field that had yet to see the light of day, and so we embarked on this collaborative enterprise, across continents and cultures, time zones and academic years. For both of us, this book was our first writing collaboration with a colleague on the other side of the globe and as we crafted our work we felt at times that the media visionary, Marshall McLuhan, must have been chuckling quietly in some time-warped corner of cyberspace. This book is first and foremost, a product of the information technologies with which we engage daily. Writing it would have been unimaginable without email in particular, since email made the distance between our respective geographical spaces almost irrelevant, and working to deadlines possible. Equally important, however, have been the international people networks, like the International Association of Media and Communication Research (IAMCR) and its associated conferences which created environments where it was possible to share ideas and develop this and other international projects. IAMCR introduced us to each other and made it possible for us to develop the collegial relationship that eventually produced this book. The other network we share is the loose one of feminist media scholars and its more formalized structure in the shape of the journal, *Feminist Media Studies*, which keeps us focused on what we are doing and why it's important.

As always with a co-production such as this, each of Karen Ross and Virginia Nightingale has her own set of acknowledgements. Karen Ross would like to thank the colleagues and students who, in any number of big and small ways,

have shaped my thinking about audiences, especially the lived realities of audiences as individual viewers, listeners and readers. I would also like to thank the various folks who have participated in my own audience research projects down the years whose insights have found their way into the writing of this book. Amongst my colleagues (who are also friends), I would like to specifically thank Carolyn Byerly, Sarah Hill, Katharine Sarikakis and Jennifer Tann for sustained friendship and support, and Annabelle Sreberny who started me off on my career as a media researcher. I would also like to thank my department (Communication, Media and Culture subject group) and School (Art and Design) at Coventry University for enabling me to find the time for this co-production and for providing funding for several writing meetings in several countries. Lastly, I would like to thank my partner, Barry, for all those large and small kindnesses which enabled me to prioritize this work when other things were vying for attention.

For Virginia Nightingale, in the course of writing my share of the book several colleagues, perhaps unbeknown to them, provided inspiration and encouragement through their work that should be acknowledged. The work of Richard Butsch and Henry Jenkins in the USA, and of Tom O'Regan in Australia showed definitively that audience research has and will continue to move in new directions. Richard's innovative historical research, Henry's cyber-community centred work, and Tom's ground breaking analysis of arts policy and arts audiences in Australia demonstrated the changing parameters of the field. Like Karen I owe special thanks to my Department (Communication, Design and Media) and to the University of Western Sydney for the travel funding and time allowances that enabled us to meet and plan. Last, but far from least, I give special thanks to my partner, Garry, and to my daughter, Anna, for sharing the highs and lows of this writing project with me, and to my work colleagues, Anna Gibbs, Hart Cohen and Tim Dwyer for their friendship and collegiality.

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CONTENTS

1 AUDIENCES TODAY

> The audience is the best judge of anything. They cannot be lied to. Truth brings them closer. A moment that lags — they're gonna cough.
>
> (Barbra Streisand, *Newsweek*, 5 January 1970)

When information rules

As the emerging information age begins its reorganization of everyday life, the study of media audiences has taken on renewed importance. This isn't just because *more* information is mediated, it's also because people are integrating both old and new media technologies into their lives in more complex ways. In his early discussion of the flow of television programming, Raymond Williams noted the demands made of viewers by the pace and rhythm of the incessant flow of diverse and sometimes discordant television programme fragments (Williams 1974). Today, being an audience is even more complicated. The media 'environment' is much more cluttered. Where once there was one television set and one radio in the average home, there are now several of each. Where once listening and viewing were group activities in the home, now individual listening and viewing is the domestic norm, with people sometimes using several different media simultaneously. It is not unusual today to find people reading a newspaper, book or magazine while listening to the radio or the latest MP3 track, or putting the latest interactive game on hold to take a call by mobile phone from a friend. Mobile telephony and mobile internet access have been added to the entertainment media mix, and in the future, streaming technologies for web radio and web television promise an intensification of this

media layering. Today people actively add complexity to the range of information to which they are exposed by mixing media, media sources and media activities. If we compare this media environment with the traditional idea of an audience as the people present at a performance in a theatre or at a concert, it is obvious that there has been a rapid and dramatic expansion of what it now means to *be* an audience.

The frequency, range and immediacy of media engagements that link people to the information flows that are the life blood of the information society have obviously been precipitated by the proliferation of new technologies, the convergence of 'old' and 'new' media technologies and the globalization of communication environments. Separately and together, new technologies, globalization and convergence create new opportunities for people to access information — and they pose significant challenges for contemporary understandings of media audiences and the significance of their activities. Evidence of the type of impact this change has had on what counts as audience activity was demonstrated by the emergence in the 1990s of reality TV.

Audiences and reality TV

Reality TV was developed during the 1990s as a means to revitalize a world of jaded television viewers by adding new sensations of immediacy and agency to the TV viewing experience. This mock ethnographic genre aimed to exploit the interest of viewers in real-life stories. The ratings potential of the emerging genre had been anticipated by the depth of viewer interest in the stories and characters of 'ethnographic' documentaries like Michael Apted's, *Seven Up* series and by early 'fly on the wall' programmes like the successful British/Australian co-production, *Sylvania Waters*. This programme documented the everyday dramas of an 'ordinary' family living in Sydney, Australia. It offered viewers an opportunity to witness the daily dilemmas, thought processes, reasoning and reactions of ordinary people as they deal with the events of everyday life. Viewers witnessed these processes in lives other than their own, and responded by conferring celebrity status on the programme's participants. As 'fly on the wall TV' metamorphosed into 'reality TV', these early experiments were 'enhanced' with increasingly exotic locations, more glamorous, sexy, adventurous and willing participants, and increasing levels of producer control of and intervention in the fabricated 'TV reality'.

Reality TV reached the height of its popularity with programmes like *Survivor* and *Big Brother*. These programmes were franchised internationally and involved the production of local versions of a global TV 'product' in countries throughout the world. And, at the height of their popularity, they

evoked unprecedented ratings and intensity of TV viewer involvement. Importantly, *Big Brother* offered viewers room to intervene in the onscreen world of the programme. At first this was limited to voting on which participant/contestant should be voted out of the Big Brother house and off the screen and this telephone voting constituted an added income stream for the production company. But viewer involvement did not stop at the telephone. In Britain, viewers gathered outside the Big Brother house to welcome out the contestants voted off the programme that week: other fans tried to evade security and invade the house itself. Many started dressing to look like contestants, or mimicked personal traits and characteristics of the participants, and by the time an Australian version of the programme was broadcast in 2001, these activities had been incorporated into the programme planning. In addition, participants inside and their support groups outside the house began to politicize the voting by engaging in rigging tactics, using mobile phones and automatic number redial techniques, to try and ensure their 'candidate' in the house emerged the winner.

The intensity of emotional involvement exhibited by viewers of reality TV led programme executives to consider new ways to monitor, channel and exploit viewer interest. The usual press, radio and TV promotion and programme-based news therefore expanded to include website and email initiatives, and the development of streaming technologies for TV and radio on the world wide web offered additional opportunities for actively recruiting and estimating viewer response to the programmes on a daily basis. The new strategies for engaging audiences invariably required unprecedented levels of interactivity between the production company and the public. Viewers were encouraged to visit the website, and for a small subscription fee, could buy additional access to coverage of the more intimate activities and interests of the participants. Viewers freely emailed opinions and reactions, likes and dislikes, directly to the programme websites. Internet technologies therefore allowed production staff more immediate, detailed and specific feedback from viewers than could be gained from syndicated ratings services (see Chapter 3), and provided them with the option of collaborating more closely with audiences in the provision of a greater viewing pleasure.

The *Big Brother* phenomenon was in many ways a watershed for our understanding of media audiences. It demonstrated forcefully one of the central tenets proposed in this book: that a mass media phenomenon cannot be explained by studying audiences or people factors alone. Viewing, listening and/or reading are events that invite participation, and people's participation in media events can take many and varied forms. Increasingly the ways of being an audience for a particular story or character set involves engaging with several media and seeking out or piecing together the story across multiple media. Being an audience now has an investigative dimension, and audience curiosity is

subject to commercial exploitation. The *Pokemon* phenomenon is another case where the engagement of audience curiosity was opened up for commercial exploitation. It was possible to become a better *Pokemon* player by searching for additional information — by viewing the TV series, buying collector cards, and searching the internet for *Pokemon* cheats. Allegiance to the *Pokemon* phenomenon was also demonstrated by the acquisition of licensed merchandise. So, *being* an audience now extends well beyond viewing, listening or reading, and as a result, new approaches to audience research are needed, even if the research methods audience researchers call on remain fundamentally the same.

Naming audiences as people and groups

The word *audience* is so much part of our everyday talk that its complexity is often taken for granted. The word, after all, has a history that extends back into unrecorded time, and reflects pre-broadcasting modes of accessing information. In media studies *audience* is mostly used as a way of talking about people, either as groups or as individuals. It is used to refer to large groups of people, like the mass audience for television news, newspaper readerships, the general public, or even people attending a major sporting event or a rock concert. The people in such groups are seen as having little connection with each other, other than an interest in the event they are attending or witnessing.

The word *audience* is also used to refer to groups of people who are linked by ties of more enduring socio-cultural significance. These 'audiences' may be described as subcultures, taste cultures, fan cultures, ethnic diasporas, indigenous or religious communities, and even domestic households. Members of these 'groups' bring certain shared interpretative perspectives to their engagements with media and so are perhaps better described as *formations* rather than *masses*. Such formations are shaped by pre-existing social and cultural histories and conditions, and sometimes also by a sense of shared interests that incline them to repeatedly use particular media vehicles (like newspapers or radio programmes). These social formations exist independently of the media, however, and so participation in media events does not usually exhaust the range of their communal activity. Audience formations may combine or disperse to engage with the media, or be simultaneously together and apart — as is evident at major sports stadiums where audiences simultaneously watch the game on the field and the televised game on the big screen, and see themselves watching the screen at the game.

Then again, the word 'audience' may be used to refer to relatively small, local groups or congregations, like the people who attend a religious service, a school

speech day, a theatre performance, or a poetry reading. These groups remind us that their purpose requires a designated space: a church, a school, a theatre. The conjunction of time and space is important in defining audiences. The expansion of access to the internet has created virtual spaces where even smaller groups assemble. Meeting in time, but separated in space, the micro-groups who frequent internet chat sites, gaming communities and other web-based activities are new members of the audience family.

Whatever the size of the group or the materiality of the space involved, it is obvious that *being an audience* has to involve more than just being in a group of people. After all, masses of people crowd into railway stations, airport terminals, holiday resorts and shopping malls, yet these people are not being 'audiences'. People meet in small groups for dinner and discussion, yet they are not described as audiences when they do so. Something else is required for people to be described as audiences. The *extra* required for a *gathering* to become an *audience* is for participation to be structured according to power relations governing the access to and use made of the informational dimension of the event. The guests at the dinner party become an audience when someone starts to tell a story, and the group contributes rapt attention for the telling. When talking about media audiences, the mediatization of information is often assumed to encompass the power and control dimensions of the media event. Yet the increasing complexity of the media environment, and the growing diversity of audience engagements, mean that it is time to re-examine such assumptions, and to expand our definitions of what 'media audience' means.

A media event perspective

Contemporary urban life depends on the media for the fast and efficient sharing of information. The media enable people who may otherwise have no direct contact to share access to the knowledge base on which their everyday lives are grounded. By being audiences, people navigate the complexity of contemporary life, and enjoy a wide variety of active and satisfying social and cultural experiences. The changing media landscape has, therefore, enabled a dramatic expansion in the range and nature of the media spaces where communicative engagement is practised. Being part of an audience, using the skills required to engage with mediated information, is now equal in importance with family and interpersonal interactions. These are all means by which people keep abreast of current affairs and contemporary trends, entertain themselves, relax, take time out, become involved with the cultural life of their communities and make themselves into interesting people. Everyone relies on being able

to discuss the films, books or TV programmes they have seen that provoke comment or reflection about the world around us.

Generally speaking, being part of an audience means being part of a media event, where people engage with mediated information. People *are* audiences when they are *in an audience* and *in audience*. All media events are audience events since they require people to hang out in media time-spaces where they physically, mentally and emotionally engage with media materials, technologies and power structures. The audience event invokes the power relations that structure the media as social institutions and delimit the options available to people for involvement in the means of cultural production. Human groups have specified such arrangements for telling stories from time immemorial. For example, the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski (1954 [1948]) carried out fieldwork among the Trobriand Islanders of New Guinea in the 1920s. During his fieldwork he noted that the Islanders made special arrangements for telling different types of stories. Myths, for example, were regarded as true and sacred explanations of the origins of the world, and legends explained why certain clans held power and others did not, while the fairy tale was told for the amusement and enjoyment of the listeners and to promote sociability among them. Unlike the other story forms, he noted that for fairy tales:

> Every story is 'owned' by a member of the community. Each story, though known by many, may be recited only by the 'owner'; he may, however, present it to someone else by teaching that person and authorizing him to retell it. But not all the 'owners' know how to thrill and to raise a hearty laugh, which is one of the main ends of such stories. A good raconteur has to change his voice in the dialogue, chant the ditties with due temperament, gesticulate, and in general play to the gallery.
>
> (Malinowski 1954/1948: 102)

Even the telling of fairy stories can be surrounded by conventions that differentiate who is permitted to tell the story and who may listen, and by, in this case at least, communal endorsement of arrangements made to ensure that audiences can hear the story told well. It is this type of arrangement that we find, in a much more highly regulated and institutionalized form, in the relations between mass media and audiences. Rights to produce and to tell the stories that delight and entertain audiences have been licensed to the media industries. The power structure, evident in the media industries' control of media production, in turn governs who creates and who engages with media, and it presupposes the involvement of people's bodies, their physical being, in the time-spaces media create. In the complex communications environments and knowledge spaces that characterize the Information Age, audience events occupy an increasingly pivotal role as the means by which knowledge is

transformed into social, cultural, economic and political action. The media event, then, involves simultaneously the minutiae of personal audience interests and actions and the complex sets of conditions that are brought into play to ensure the ongoing production of the culture's stories.

Broadly speaking five aspects of media events recur as sources of media research interest:

1. the audience participants as individuals;
2. the audience activities of the participants in the media event;
3. the media time/space of the event;
4. the media power relations that structure the event; and
5. the mediatized information with which people engage.

In all audience research, certain assumptions are made about what aspects of the media event are acting on audiences and about whether or not such 'influence' is likely to benefit them. In subcultures and fan research, for example, the aim is to trace the modes by which subcultural identity is maintained or threatened by the media and its patterns of representation, both of people and their perspectives on current events. Subcultures research considers:

1. who the subculture is in terms of its history and of its current socio-cultural situation;
2. what types of media activities members engage in or organize for themselves;
3. how media materials orient the group in time and space by assisting group members to better understand the past, the present or their future direction;
4. how the subculture is empowered (or not) by the power relations that structure the media event;
5. how the members of the subculture interpret — by accepting, negotiating or resisting — the meanings privileged by the textual structure of the media message.

In the case of subcultures, a fairly thorough overview of the media event is considered necessary to understand the event and the subculture's participation in mass culture.

In ratings analysis, by contrast, the aim is to produce an abstract map of the mass audience and of mass audience behaviour. To achieve the sort of measure of audience behaviour that can be used in statistical analysis, the media event and the behaviour of audiences have to be reduced to their most basic elements. In terms of our media event template:

1. only easily verifiable audience demographics (age, sex, and so on) are taken into account in determining audience 'composition';

2. one audience behaviour only, *exposure* or tuning in, is counted for the purpose of audience measurement;
3. analysis of the media time/space is limited to identification of the daypart (defined by hours of the day when viewing occurred, or by the type of content viewed – see Webster, Phalen and Lichty 2000: 240);
4. the structures of the media come into play only in terms of their capacity to offer a broadcasting service to the place where the viewer/listener is located; and
5. media content is considered a programming or scheduling matter, rather than a matter of concern to audiences.

Ratings analysis has a very specific purpose — audience measurement. Its purpose is best served by streamlining the sorts of information taken into account (ratings analysis is examined in detail in Chapter 3), so it defines the media event in a very abstract way.

These examples demonstrate that what we know about audiences is dependent on how the media event is defined and on what aspects of audience engagement with the media are being researched. By exploring the media event as a complex socio-cultural phenomenon, much more detailed and interesting information is developed about media audiences — about who they are and what they are doing, and about the long-term cultural significance of their activities. In Chapter 2, several studies that use historical research to examine the long-term implications of media events are introduced. These studies show that the repercussions of audience adoption of new media can be the catalyst for dramatic social and cultural change. The chapter then presents some of the key approaches to audience research (content and response analysis; personal influence; uses and gratifications; encoding/decoding) by examining the problems they address and the definitions of the media event they invoke.

From the perspective of the broadcast media industries, the most important thing about audiences is whether they are tuned in or not. The act of tuning in is called 'exposure' and the relevance of this behaviour as the basis for information about audiences is questioned in Chapter 3. As indicated above, exposure is the only audience act that is documented and statistically analysed by the commercially operated research firms who produce ratings analysis. In most parts of the world, the sale of audience exposures is used to fund broadcasting services. Since audience exposures are the only commodity produced by broadcasting, the ratings system doubles as a form of communication between broadcasters and audiences. However, the power balance in this system of communication favours the broadcaster, and because the information to which broadcasters pay attention, the exposure, is abstract, this system does not necessarily work in the long-term interests of audiences. For this reason it is

important to understand at least the basic terms used in ratings analysis and to gain a better understanding of how broadcasters and advertisers think about audiences.

The basic principles and techniques of ratings research were developed in the early days of mass broadcasting. Syndicated ratings services have been available to the broadcasting industries since the mid-1930s (Beville 1988: 258). While the recording and processing of audience measurement has been transformed over the years, the basic procedures and formulae used have remained constant. Recently, however, the relevance of people meters and diaries has been challenged by new technologies for recording and analysing ratings data. New information technologies allow audiences to be monitored, and their consumer decision-making analysed, more quickly and more thoroughly than ever before. The internet allows people's net-surfing to be followed and analysed for commercial opportunities. The computing power of the Information Age has led audience measurement researchers to be able to embrace a new-found interest in the relationship between broadcast and internet service providers and their client audiences. Chapter 3 therefore concludes with some discussion of cyber activities where audiences and industry engage in the same or parallel activities, like 'data mining', software co-development, news production and file sharing. The internet is a media space where industry and audience rights are currently hotly disputed, while still in the process of being defined and developed. In this context, one aspect of the media event considered least relevant for ratings analysis in the past — that is the analysis of what audiences do with the information they gather from the internet — emerges as the site of contestation over future media growth.

The history of audience research is littered with the corpses of studies that have tried and failed to demonstrate, once and for all, a cause and effect relationship between media message and receiver behaviour. Chapter 4 therefore provides a journey through the 'effects' literature, moving from early concerns with propaganda through to the more contemporary debates that question whether mass media have any effect at all. Whilst there is little doubt, in the literature as much as amongst armchair philosophers, that the media play an important role in contributing to the social, economic and cultural environment in which we live, attempting to show precisely that this message causes that behaviour is rather a lost cause. Chapter 4 thus maps out the chronological development of the cause-effect paradigm and shows how researchers have come full circle from early audience theories which insisted that there was a simple one-way flow of influence from the media to the audience, through a rejection of audience passivity, back to a serious concern over the influence of, in particular, violent media content on criminal or violent activity. Along the way, we consider the still controversial view that watching violent films or