



In search of the audience

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What is an 'audience'?

We all are members of media audiences. On many occasions, we are self-consciously so – such as when we sit in darkness in a cinema, transfixed by a larger-than-life screen, sharing the experience with a group of relative strangers. More frequently, we are part of an audience through habit or circumstance. Much of our media use is habitual. We are often barely aware of it. We scan the morning newspaper, half-listen to the car radio or iPod on the journey to work or university, glance at billboards, check online daily news updates, glance at the evening news bulletin – all this happens amidst the clutter of domestic life and regular patterns of work and leisure.

We can be *willing*, *unwilling* and *accidental* members of media audiences. We offer our time and attention to all kinds of media. We can be considered as engaging in unpaid work, for we have considerable economic value once we join others to constitute an audience. It may be difficult for us to think of watching television or sitting in a cinema as 'work', for pleasure, entertainment and enjoyment seem to be the usual – and expected – outcomes. On many such occasions we pay a fee (for a cinema ticket or pay-TV subscription for example) and we have had to earn this in some way. Even those forms of media we generally regard as 'free' require forms of payment which are not always visible. With free-to-air (FTA) television, for example, we are required to either pay for this in direct form, through broadcasting fees in some countries, or indirectly, through taxes that pay for public radio and government-supported television, such as Radio New Zealand and Freeview. With commercial television, we 'pay' through having to watch frequent advertisements. The costs of advertising goods and services are usually built into the purchase price, so in a sense we are paying twice.

When we sit down to catch the latest episode of *Shortland Street* or *Two and a Half Men*, we are part of the audience for these long-running programmes. We may call ourselves 'fans' of such programmes, for which we set aside specified blocks of time every weeknight or once a week (television executives call this 'appointment viewing'). We might also say that we are 'addicted' to certain programmes or genres (such as sport or reality shows) even though 'addicted' can have certain pejorative connotations. In such circumstances we occupy space both as an individual and as a collective audience of fellow viewers, most of whom we do not know nor will ever get to know.



This chapter looks at ways that ‘the audience’ is conceived and researched. It will survey two quite different research traditions: the instrumental research done by the media industries to *measure* audiences, and ongoing scholarly debates about how to research ‘the audience’. It will consider how the commonly accepted understandings of audience in New Zealand have drawn on overseas influences. It concludes by considering how the internet raises new questions for both media industries *and* media scholars. Does web interactivity finally liberate audiences from old commercial constraints? Or are media corporations simply evolving sophisticated new ways of tracking our media use?



The television audience: an industry perspective

When we watch television, there is a sense in which we are part of an imagined rather than an actual audience. The audience most important to the television industry comprises those individuals who have a Peoplemeter device attached to their household television sets to report the time and duration of their viewing. This subset of ‘typical’ viewers effectively becomes ‘the television audience’ that determines *ratings*. ‘Cumulative, self-reported viewing...provide[s] a continuous and viable means of providing tidy measurement, packaging, and institutional control of audiences’ (Lealand, 2007, pp. 3792–93).

This system of measurement prevails across the world, despite obvious flaws. Such measurement cannot, for example, measure attention levels, responses to content (such as emotional involvement, disinterest or annoyance with content), unreported absences, or muting of the audio signal during commercial breaks. Indeed, the system run by AGB Nielsen Media Research in New Zealand since 1990 (with Peoplemeters in 500 homes, representing 1250 potential television viewers) only claims to measure presence in a room where a television set is on. Nevertheless, such sketchy information is used to provide:

1. Information about audiences on which programmers can make decisions on what to buy and where to screen it.
2. A currency for the buying and selling of commercial air time on TV (AGB Nielsen Media Research, 2008).

This idea of *currency* is central to the purpose of commercial television; that is, viewing is less about people watching programmes than it is about delivering pre-determined audiences to advertisers. There is a complex of interests (programme schedulers, television sales and marketing, media buyers, commercial producers) dependent on information about what viewers are watching, or likely to watch or being exposed to.

This commercial model of the television audience brings us back to the points made above; wherein a select group of viewers provides unpaid labour (time and attention; sustained pressing of buttons on Peoplemeter remotes) and the data is sold to other interested parties. But this is not just important for commercial television. Public service broadcasting also has to demonstrate that it can attract an adequately sized audience in order to justify its call on the public purse. This system of measuring and commodifying the television audience has been the

norm for many years and although other kinds of research – especially research done by academic researchers – have posited other versions of the television audience, they have not yet been able to dislodge this dominant model.



Other media audiences

Not just television but virtually all media forms place a commercial value on their audiences. Examples include:

- **Radio.** New Zealand radio stations conduct market surveys to determine who is listening to which stations over a set period. This measures the audience share in any given market, and enables radio stations or networks to set advertising rates until the next survey period (Research International NZ, 2008).
- **Cinema.** The box office – the number of tickets sold for admission to a particular film, both in its home (domestic) market and internationally – remains the primary measure of success or failure, even though film companies and distributors derive income from numerous other sources, such as DVD releases and sales to television. Such ‘secondary’ income is now collectively greater than conventional movie ticket sales (Motion Pictures Distributors Association of NZ, 2008).
- **Newspapers and magazines.** Measurement includes circulation (subscriptions and/or counter sales in a given sales period) and readership (the number of people who might read a single issue of a magazine or newspaper) (Nielsen Media NZ, 2008).
- **Websites.** Internet use is measured by collecting cookies across websites in order to track internet use. It is now possible to track each click we make on the internet.

Readership and ratings systems have become the global currency for commercial media. They represent opportunities for making money. In the mid 1980s, at the height of network television ratings in the US, *The Cosby Show* claimed to offer advertisers 50 million eyeballs per episode. It was the same in New Zealand. In the early 1980s TV One could claim to reach the majority of New Zealand households in primetime news with one 30-second ad (Zanker, 1993, p. 42). Now the television audience is fragmenting. In the USA in 2007, niche pay-TV grabbed 55% of total television viewership. In April 2008, Sky Network Television claimed a 19% share of the 30- to 54-year-old range of television viewing in New Zealand (Carney, 2008).



The rise of marketing research

The old mantra of ‘buying eyeballs’ in ‘prime time’ is no longer dominant. Media industries increasingly use other forms of market research (surveys, interviews, focus groups) in order to supply information to programmers, who are increasingly interested in the value of *specialised* audiences. As a result some audiences have more value than others. Gabler (2003) points out that in the United States the 18–49 demographic is the single-

most important factor in determining what Americans see, hear and read. Young people are perceived to be harder to reach, but more desirable for advertisers because they are open to new brands; this despite the fact that the over-55-year-old audience has considerably more spending power (Gabler, 2003). New Zealand is no different, with TV One and TV3 primetime news in New Zealand battling for a young demographic.

Traditional ratings refinements like *reach* (the number of people that listen to/or view a programme) and *share* (the number of listeners/viewers tuned into a programme out of all tuned in) are now augmented by other tools. These include *psychographics* which explore the psychological profile of a demographic according to shared characteristics like age, income and consumption.

Psychographic market research and analysis is used to target perceived market gaps and design fresh creative approaches to appeal to small market niches (Zanker, 1993). Popular terms like the so-called 'Gen X' and 'Gen Y' are derived from such marketing reports, which often take an anthropological approach to studying and identifying target audiences. For example, Dee Dee Gorman used anthropology to map street corner ghetto 'cool' for US advertising agencies (Gladwell, 1997) and a marketer conducting 'bedroom anthropology' tagged a Bart Simpson poster on a boy's bedroom wall as a sign of early transition to puberty, thus marking the boy as a prospect for hair gel and deodorant advertisements (Harriman, 1999). In New Zealand market research has been used to refine the new TV3 brand in 1988 and to reposition milk as 'cool' to young people in the late 1990s, achieving 'cut through' using scratchy super-8 scenes of skateboarding in LA to advertise the milk-based drink Primo. And in 2004 NZ Vodafone coined the term 'pxt' to connect with younger consumers in a successful campaign that was exported to larger markets (Crayford & McGreevy, 2001).

New Zealand programmers have also become highly strategic. Karen Bieleski, programmer for the fourth-largest free-to-air channel, Prime, has the challenge of scheduling her channel against TVNZ (with approximately 20 times the buying budget), TV3 (with up to 10 times more buying power) and the Māori Television Service (with about twice the buying budget). For her, 'niche is the new normal' (Bieleski, 2008). Her programming victories against the big players are about finding neglected or fringe audiences who still hold appeal for advertisers, such as the cult following for *The Flight of the Conchords*. She also won healthy ratings for well-heeled older viewers by playing *Antiques Roadshow*, dumped by TV One in its search for a younger audience.



Academic constructions of the television audience

There have been many battles within academia over how to research and understand the television audience. This section will provide a brief overview of key academic research strands that impinge on media policy and academic research within New Zealand. The first tradition is primarily psychological, and centred on media effects. It considers what media content does to individuals. The second strand emerged from British cultural studies, sociology and anthropology in the 1970s. It is concerned with the meanings that people (alone and in groups) draw from media content.

Effects research

During the 1960s and '70s, at the same time that ratings were becoming the global currency for measuring commercial television audiences, there were growing fears about the powerful effects of television on audiences and on children in particular. The concerns of parents and moral watchdogs were picked up by popular media and it is fair to say that alarmist coverage has stoked regular 'moral panics' about television violence ever since. It is no surprise, therefore, that there has been substantial funding for research into media effects. Research which investigates the positive effects of television has always been less likely to find funding, but much time and money have been directed to proving the proposition that television is a health issue for adults and especially children.

One thing that unites much psychological research, and analysis of media images inspired by such research, is a concern over the perceived power of television to influence behaviour and the powerlessness of audiences to resist messages; perceptions which are often framed by particular ideological and class biases (Grimes, Anderson & Bergen, 2008). Television is viewed as a 'pathology' alleged to have serious effects such as violence, obesity, urban crime and lower IQ. Are audiences passive and easily influenced by television and film content? Do viewers draw on violent and skewed (sexist and racist) media messages to construct or confirm a warped understanding of how the outside world works?

Such was the concern of politicians in the early 1970s that the US Surgeon General was asked to reach a 'health diagnosis' on television viewing. His team surveyed the thousands of already completed studies and concluded that television content has different impacts on different people in different ways and that age, sex, social environment, past experiences and parental influences all play a part. This cautious conclusion in 1972 (and again in 1982) has not staunched the funding of 'effects research'. Critics of American effects research argue that the American social context, including inequality, urban blight and lax gun laws, is missing from these debates (Barker & Petley, 2001). Indeed, the primary source of violent death and injury in most countries is motor car accidents, but no one is yet calling for the abolition of cars.

Nevertheless, it is this American research that is still most likely to be quoted by New Zealand journalists. It is also often unclear whether such stories report new primary research or simply replicate press releases from bodies like the American Psychological Association recycling literature reviews of old 'effects' research. This has political implications. A telling case occurred after the New Zealand general election of 2001. The Labour Party needed the Green Party to form a coalition. Sue Kedgley of the Greens had lobbied for many years on the health 'problem' for children of television violence. The price of the coalition agreement was a \$300,000 research project to yet again survey the literature on television violence (Zanker, 2004). This report came to similar cautious conclusions about the effects of television violence as the Surgeon General's report back in 1972. It concludes that the strength of the relationship between TV violence and violent behaviour is relatively modest and noted that any eventual

effect is determined by a complex interaction of factors (Prasad, 2004). It appears to have had little impact on policy making and programme purchasing.

'New audience studies' and the active audience

Other research and philosophical questions have long engaged media scholars, despite regular headlines about 'effects' research in the popular press (Barker & Petley, 2001). In the UK, early critics like F.R. Leavis and Lord Reith tended to be more concerned with the impact of American music, cartoons and action series on British 'taste'. Would local culture be 'dumbed down' by US popular culture on radio and 'telly'? The BBC became the guardian of middle-class standards and taste (Briggs & Burke, 2002). There were similar concerns expressed about American popular music on early radio in New Zealand (Pauling, 1994).

During the 1970s a new generation of politically motivated scholars began to question the elitism of middle-class British tastes, and colonial attitudes began to be challenged. British Cultural Studies scholars pioneered research that explored how audiences actually used television at home and in their social worlds. This research arguably gave audience members a voice for the first time.

Importantly, this research demonstrated that audiences are not gullible or easily influenced by media content. Audiences, to the contrary, can be very active, creative and unpredictable interpreters of television texts. This directly challenged the findings of effects researchers as well as the structuralist analysis of textual meaning (such as semiotics) that had spread from France during the 1960s and early '70s.

Kothari (2004) summarises the key claims of 'new' audience research of the 1970s and 1980s as follows:

- Audiences are active.
- They have interpretive agency.
- Their responses are not always prescribed in the text.
- Audiences construct meanings according to their particular contexts and lived experience.
- Audiences are engaged in a dialogic encounter with texts and, in certain situations, not only influence the production of meanings, but also the construction of texts (p. 56).

Many television producers have a deep respect for audiences' 'dialogic encounters' with their programmes. For example the producers of *What Now?* keep in close touch with what fans think through letters, web chat and focus groups, and producers of reality television shows engage the audience directly. Audience votes and feedback often become part of the show itself.

What is curious is that neither scholarly studies of the active audience nor the increasingly sophisticated market and production research that draws inspiration from this active audience research have appeared to ruffle the composure of those living off the currency of simple ratings over recent decades. As former New Zealand programme scheduler Bettina Hollings revealingly put it: 'Ratings are the fiction we all choose to believe in' (Hollings, 1996).

In recent years, however, this media industry consensus over the currency

of ratings has begun to fray under the pressure of clients who want to know how best to spend their advertising and marketing dollar in an increasingly fragmented and interactive media environment.



Researching young people as 'audiences'

The behaviour and attitudes of young people as an audience offers a lens through which to understand recent continuities and shifts in audience behaviour. For example, our research with children between 8 and 13 years of age was designed to give them a voice as audiences. We surveyed, observed and discussed media issues with young people. We also invited them to create drawings to describe their media experiences and these, as well as the conversations during such activities, often provided rich insights into their media experiences.

There is a prevailing (and romantic?) view that young people are 'digital natives' who have rejected old media (print, television, radio) for new converged mobile media. The picture is more complex and interesting. Yes, young people gossip about what they want to own and share insider knowledge about new brands and products. Yes, this knowledge can be used cruelly in the pecking order of peer groups. But it is also clear that mobile technology helps busy families to keep their children safe and in touch with extended family. New Zealand is a mobile nation of immigrants. Family networks stretch around the world and contact with relatives in the Pacific, India, China and Africa are very important to them.

Our 2007 research also told us about the continued importance of television in children's lives as it remains the first media window for news about new hits, celebrities and fads. Plotlines and ads are woven into schoolyard chat and play. In other words, children brilliantly exemplify being both television audiences and fans.

But you can no longer research young people as *just* a television audience (Palmer, 1986). It no longer matters very much to young people *where* they discover content. Researchers call them 'platform agnostic' because if given access (digital access varies widely across the globe) they will track their favourite entertainment brands across media windows (whether books, magazines, websites, games, films) on various pieces of personalised equipment (consoles, Macs, PCs, mobile phones, iPods) as well as chatting about them on social networking sites. They behave as audiences, fans, users, creators and even pirates of media content (Lealand & Zanker, 2008).

However it is important not to get carried away with the evidence of the newfound agency of young people as they track, mix, create and share media content. We should be wary about claims as to what kind of power audiences and fans of popular culture can exert on the media choices available. Who really has the power to shape media content? We have cross-national empirical research that demonstrates that it is important to acknowledge both audience agency and the ongoing power of corporate media to shape and market flows of branded content (Livingstone & Drotner, 2008).

A useful way to acknowledge corporate influences on audience experiences

is to think about television consumption as a 'circuit of meaning' (Hall, 1994) that embraces production, text(s) and context. This enables both the local and contextual powers of fans and audiences and the powers of television companies, advertisers and regulators to be part of any media analysis.

But even this approach, that seemingly takes the best from audience studies, cultural studies and political economy, now has its sceptics. Livingstone (2007, p. 2) suggests that the evolution of the 'circuit of meaning' of production, media text and contexts of use may have come a little too late as convergence reshapes audience behaviour.

If 'new audience research' took account of the pleasures of television, then it may be time to ask new research questions that relate to audience interactions across evolving interactive, multimedia, multi-sited, branded mobile media use. There are some who go so far as to argue that the term 'audience', so embedded in television, may have reached its use-by date.



Changing constructs: Audience, media user, producer, prosumer?

One thing is becoming clear to industry and academic researchers in developed nations: the term 'audience' is now inadequate to describe the range of people's engagement with their media. Researchers are grappling with how best to talk about what people do with their media. Some ask whether the internet is a medium in its own right. Or is it simply the digital space in which audiences freely access and manipulate the range of text, sound and image now available? Commercial media ask, 'what is happening to the revenue streams from copyright and advertising that traditionally supported our commercial media model?'

If we cannot use the term 'audience', what term can we use to replace it? Other terms come with conceptual baggage. For example the term 'user' conveys an individualistic or atomistic notion of the communication process (Livingstone, 2007) when we already know from evidence that our media use is profoundly social. There are further difficulties with the term 'interactive user'. This is connected in the popular imagination with 'new' media and is associated with the idea of convergence in which TV, radio, film, games, music, images, text can be accessed on a range of platforms (TV, computer, phone) and content pushed (via ads or spam) or pulled (via customised services and RSS feeds). But the telephone was 'interactive' last century. Interactivity also embraces Twitter, 'hanging out' on Facebook or playing *World of Warcraft* with thousands. Kiouisis has identified interactivity as, 'the context in which messages are exchanged, a property of the technology itself, or even a perception in the users' mind' (cited in Holmes, 2004, p. 217).

'Producer' at least conveys active participation. But audiences have actively produced since the Portapak arrived in the '70s and TV bloopers appeared on telly. Again 'producer' is too broad. It describes everything from the banality of texting, to the design sophistication of gaming engines or feature films, and we should not consider all content to be equal. What is more, not everyone produces and no medium exists without someone reading it, watching it or listening to it.

The term 'prosumer' articulates the overlapping of roles between producers and consumers made possible through convergence. The internet provides new opportunities for participation and collaboration. Online networks and communities (the web 2.0 environment) enable prosumers to become key to determining the final look, feel or functionality of new products and services. These online user networks are becoming part of design teams for entertainment products (like games) in ways that see the needs of entertainment industries, marketers and users becoming aligned (Jenkins, 2006a and 2006b).

Creative divisions may welcome the new ideas that come from sharing intellectual property and code with users, but sales and marketing may still want to sue these users as 'pirates' of copyrighted revenue streams. This tension between open access and corporate profits is worth digging into further in order to speculate as to whether prosumers will ever be freed from what Jenkins calls 'institutional greed'.



Measures of internet use

There has been extensive proprietary research into how to create commercial measurements for internet use. Google, now the epicentre of new web 2.0 social communities, AOL, Disney and other advertising interests met as early as 1996 to create a set of unifying principles for online media measurement. DoubleClick was the first company to automate the web advertising campaign business. It now serves online ads (up to 100,000 per second), and tracks internet use by collecting cookies across websites. 'Web bugs, like the character ET, phone home...sending back information about your online behaviour...including clicks...ie IP address...and advanced Geo-Targeting' (Chester, 2007, p. 160).

DoubleClick tracks what you have seen, how you have interacted, where you saw it and decides whether to send you ads at a later date for similar products. It decides the form of pitch and themes, adjusts ad size with your behaviour and interests and finally 'upsells you'. Google, AOL, Microsoft, Disney, MySpace and MTV all use DoubleClick. In 2007 Google beat Microsoft in a bid to buy DoubleClick for \$3.1 billion. Why? This tracking, or 'data-mining', transforms us into unique consumer profiles.

Data mining also has the potential to invade our privacy as demonstrated in the furore over Facebook attempting to sell off user purchasing information in 2007. There is also a political push in the US to privatise the 'pipes' of the internet in order to give corporate interests prime positions in search engines. For some time now a familiar combination of powerful media and marketing interests have been jostling to become internet gatekeepers.

TVNZ has attempted to stay at the cutting edge of these initiatives. It has created a 'TV New Zealand' YouTube channel and in March 2009 TVNZ acquired local TiVo rights to enable video on demand and other future digital television services. These initiatives give New Zealand advertisers access to combined audiences across platforms.



Conclusion

How therefore can we best understand audiences? Are we witnessing a paradigm shift that frees audiences and transforms them into prosumers and producers? Or are we seeing patterns of continuity and evolution in commercial media behaviour? The evolving media environment is a complex and contested zone where different objectives co-exist.

The more hyperventilated commentators in *Wired* magazine claim that we are entering a golden age of 'Media Me' where we can create our own tailored media worlds, thus challenging the very power of corporate media giants. We can all build Wikipedia in the spirit of the early cyber-utopians. We can get our ideas out there on blogs and YouTube. We can join online social networks like Facebook, Bebo, Flickr. We can download from iTunes or pirate content using BitTorrent knowing that we will be unlucky to be caught. But others argue that we still face the same questions raised by Hall's 'circuits of meaning' that include media pleasures, cultural spaces and corporate power. If we dig deeper we find that market forces are increasingly active despite the apparent transparency of our new digital screens.

We are in a period where the ideals of liberated user communities associated with web 2.0 are colliding with new media business models of data mining. Will new forms of media collaboration emerge? Can emerging musicians and filmmakers reach their fans and earn income when so many of 'Gen Y' have cheerfully made a habit of piracy? The old audience is dead; long live new forms of audience. This means that traditional understandings of 'audience', and long-held assumptions about audience behaviour, are increasingly open to scrutiny.

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