

CHAPTER 9

Investigating audiences: what do people do with media?

Thinking about what audiences do with media texts

In his latest book, *We-think*, cultural commentator, analyst and UK government advisor Charles Leadbeater recounts an incident that offers a suggestive insight into the nature of media consumers. He writes of how, in 2004, the closing frames of a cinema advertisement for the game *Halo 2* featured a flickering web address – www.ilovebees.com. Intrigued, thousands of fans visited the site which, oddly, featured news of a missing beekeeper with information about several hundred global co-ordinates, as well as a warning message of a ‘system’ that was in peril. As Leadbeater’s awed account goes on, here was a site presenting confused but intriguing details and a ticking clock.

In the following few months, over 600,000 visitors to the site set out, without instructions, rules or guidance, to investigate this apparent mystery. Working independently at first and then collectively, this mass of people

managed an incredible feat of co-ordination, against the clock, to engage with what ultimately turned out to be an extended game, created by the company 42 Entertainment (www.42entertainment.com/). Thus:

The game began to come to a head on 24 August, as thousands of players turned up at the pay phones [which were at the location of the global co-ordinates] armed with every conceivable piece of digital communication equipment. . . players of I Love Bees showed that a mass of independent people, with different information, skills and outlooks, working together in the right way, can discover, analyse, co-ordinate, create and innovate together’.

(Leadbeater, 2008) (For a full account online see www.wethinkthebook.net/home.aspx)

Leadbeater takes this instance as evidence for the optimistic and creative

possibilities of new media, but it also serves as a useful illustration of the issues dealt with in this chapter – namely the productive activities and capabilities of media users, consumer and audiences. Here is evidence of media users doing something beyond their allotted role as simple, passive consumers of media product, behaving in ways that seem irreducible to some ‘effect’ of media form and message. Respondents to this website enigma worked proactively, collectively, innovatively and creatively in the service of more than individual satisfaction or pleasure.

Interestingly, too, this instance of audience behaviour may also have been a result of the particular nature of this media text and the way that it was planned and made available, an indication both of the changing relationship of producers and audiences and of the way in which the boundaries between the two are being blurred.

What we will do in this chapter

In the previous chapter, we considered the media's relationship with audiences in particular ways. We looked at conceptualisations, constructions and productions of the audience that resulted in a vision of a rather passive entity upon which the various media are thought to have influence or effect, or, indeed, which they actively seek to affect in terms of their economic activity. Having outlined some of the industrial and academic origins, insights and limits of such approaches (but not having discounted them entirely), which presume that media forms do things to audiences, we now move on to think about what audiences do with media forms.

The suggestion here is that what people do relates to questions of interpretation of the meaning of texts, as well as how they appropriate media products and use them to their own ends, in ways not only or immediately captured by any sense of the creator's intention. By the same degree, however, media products offer a finite resource that limits the range of possible uses.

The first section of this chapter deals with some of the theoretical approaches to the idea of the 'active audience'. First, we will start by looking at what we mean by this term, drawing upon what is known as the 'uses and gratifications' approach, which came directly out of the effects tradition. Then we consider Stuart Hall's 'encoding and decoding' model, itself a response to the kind of ideas presented by the identification of 'uses and gratifications', which fed into the innovative work of David Morley. Of particular use in developing these ideas around audience activity is a tradition in feminist scholarship. Very broadly, we track a shift from suspicions about how women are affected by the negative influence of media to how they gain genuine pleasure from their media consumption, attuned to the particular resources that they bring to that consumption. We will then consider the particular categories of 'subcultures' and 'fandom', and associated theories which present us with some conceptual tools for theorising and describing the often spectacular ways in which individuals and groups appropriate, celebrate and change media products. In the final part of this section, we will consider what is happening in online versions of audience consumption and activity, how media theorists make sense of this relatively new domain and what this means for some traditional ways of viewing audiences.

The second section is most important for detailing a range of research methods for investigating audiences. These indicate ways in which you will be able to go and conduct research of your own design in order to pursue these and other ideas.

By the end of this chapter you should be to:

- Identify key concepts and theories associated with the idea of media audience activity.
- Identify and engage with key issues and approaches to conceptualising audiences as active users and interpreters of media products and messages.
- Conduct initial research into the activity of media audiences, utilising one or more methods as appropriate.

KEY TERMS: ► **Active audiences; bricolage; cultural capital; encoding/decoding; ethics; ethnography; fandom; feminism; focus groups; gendered audiences; homology; interviews; methodology; questionnaires; subcultures; uses and gratifications; virtual communities; virtual ethnography.**

Doing media studies

Finding out about what audiences do with media

For this activity you need to locate evidence of the actual audience or audiences for any one media product and what they themselves say about and do with that product. You can do this by reading the letters page of a

newspaper or magazine, joining a TV programme's online discussion forum and so on. You might even try speaking to the people you spend time with at the movies or at concerts. The aim is to find instances where individuals discuss their media use and preferences in relation to these questions: what kind of things does your audience talk about? What do they reveal about their media use and response to the media product (as text, artefact, commodity)? Do these things seem significant? Does anyone reveal anything that surprises you?

Identifying audience activity

In proceeding, we should note, as we did in the previous chapter, that our use of the label ‘audience’ serves as a synonym for all groups of media consumers. While new media scholars will undoubtedly be struck by the fact that the field of TV studies, in talking of ‘reception’, has been most productive in its consideration of viewers of that medium, we need to include and attend to readers of the press and magazines, and listeners to radio and popular music, as well as computer gamers or players, online ‘users’ of internet facilities and so on. In encompassing these disparate groups, however, we should also be attuned to the different possibilities and means for audiences to relate to different media forms and rhetorical strategies. This distinction will have an impact upon the kinds of questions we might ask and the way that we go about seeking answers. Clearly, reading a close-print prose newspaper article is somewhat different from listening to a piece of pop music at a live concert. We should note, too, as per the reference to the productiveness of TV studies above, that some aspects of media consumption have engendered much more attention than others. Thus, while the nature of TV consumption is prodigious, media photography or even popular music studies is relatively underdeveloped in its attention to consumption.

Our motivation in this chapter has something to do with the way in which our idea of how audiences are ‘produced’ – by media and some traditions of academic thought – concentrates on and produces a very passive characterisation. Of course, there is an obvious ‘passivity’ to being an audience member, in the fact that media products are things produced ‘out there’ by companies which we’re only interested in when we want them, or believe that we want them. For most of us, ‘activity’ appears to require little more than switching on the television, or browsing the internet or a rack of magazines at the news stand. One way of seeing our role as audience members, therefore, is to see us as making a selection and then sitting back and enjoying the show!

On the other hand, isn’t our relationship with media something more than this? Beginning on an anecdotal level, most of us have a sometimes curious and variable relationship with media products in all of the variety in which we encounter them. We tend to ‘speak to’ media texts, for instance – commenting volubly on newspaper stories and TV programmes, singing along with (or rejecting) songs on the radio, expressing exasperated disbelief in the plot turns of a movie (the killer comes back to life for one more go at the heroine after being shot, stabbed, exploded and so on). We interact with others in the audience along the same lines in our reactions to media

texts – with your mum as she sits in the living room with you watching the Eurovision song contest or the news, with other concert goers at a gig, with participants in online forums or games – in ways which don’t seem to be uniform or predictable from the ‘address’ and appeal of the text.

Thinking of television in particular, a most powerful medium in the attentions of effects models, we watch in very inattentive ways in general, sometimes very ‘disrespectfully’ (of the creative effort, of the gravitas of some of the figures which populate our screen). Other times, however, we watch very attentively, sometimes obsessively and with a great deal of involvement, which sometimes goes beyond the moment of viewing. Some of us dedicate further activities to our media consumption, joining discussion groups, sometimes protesting or celebrating some media development or practice (they’re cancelling our favourite TV show, the news is biased), sometimes buying further products (DVD releases, novelisations, T-shirts) which don’t just seem to be about adding to the coffers of producers. In fact, in pursuing our media pleasures, some of us get involved in activities that are actually illegal and may be detrimental to the interests of producers. There is a long history of ‘bootlegging’ popular music concerts, for instance, in order that the fans of any one audience can indulge themselves beyond the limits set by the record company and tour promoter. More recently, the activity of online file sharing has merited legal threats from media companies against consumers (p. 00).

Anecdotally then, media consumption seems to take many forms which are not quantifiable or easily slotted into the kinds of generalities or anodyne abstractions produced by market research or the expectations of media producers. Nor is media consumption simply about a correspondence between textual meaning and cognitive understanding: we can ask, what role does our comprehension of news information or the pleasures of a computer game shoot-out have in our lives? Furthermore, in what contexts does media consumption take place and how does this impact upon how we make sense of media meanings and values for us as individuals? Such questions lead us to consider how to make sense of activity (interpreting texts, doing things with them, etc.) empirically and with some attention to the individuality and idiosyncrasies of audience members.

Audiences, then, seen from one perspective, are possibly very ‘active’, rather than the passive figures awaiting organisation by media institutions or direction by media messages. It is the significance and meaning of this activity of which we shall seek to make sense.

There is an important and obvious sense in which audience activity is worthy of serious attention – for the same reasons prompting effects traditions of research. Media forms, objects and meanings are an integral part of

modern life, contributing to our sense of the social but forming also a major part of our lives as individuals. One need only observe the number of TV screens in any home you visit, faces stuck in newspapers, magazines and comic books on public transport, or the individuals walking around with headphones attached to MP3 players to see this, not to mention the overwhelming place of the internet in our daily lives at work, in education and at play. What role media products and meanings play is deserving of our attention in order to discover how they are part of everyday life and what we do with them, just as much as they may seem increasingly to direct that life!

From 'effects' to uses and gratifications

As we suggested in our previous chapter, one thrust of audience research was founded upon intellectual suspicions of mass media institutions and forms in the context of mass social and political movements – fascism and communism, for instance, as well as the apparently effective use of media propaganda in both world wars. Research informed by this context, which pursued the cause and effect relationship between media messages and audience behaviour, continued into the post-war period but failed to find specific evidence of links between media content and attitude change, or increased levels of violence in individuals or society at large. By 1960, Joseph Klapper, a prominent effects researcher, concluded after a summary of research up to that date, that: 'mass communications does not ordinarily serve as a necessary or sufficient cause of audience effects, but rather functions through a nexus of mediating factors' (Klapper, 1960). Researchers in this tradition had come to conceive of a 'limited effects' model of media influence, highlighting the importance (and neglect) of factors such as social and cultural context in the way media forms relate to the lives of individuals. By the time of Klapper's statement, and while effects research continued (as it still does), approaches to media consumption explored beyond the effects models and attendant assumptions about audiences. In the USA, innovative work in this vein was developed by Elihu Katz and, in Britain, by James Halloran, and by Jay Blumler and Denis McQuail of the Leicester Centre for Mass Communications Research. The premise for this work was set out by Katz:

It is often argued that the mass media 'give the people what they want' and that the viewers, listeners, and readers ultimately determine the content of the media by their choices of what they will read, view, or hear. Whether or not this is a valid characterisation of the

role of the mass in relation to the media, it is only an arc of circular reasoning, unless there is independent evidence of what the people do want. More particularly, there is great need to know what people do with the media, what uses they make of what the media now give them, what satisfactions they enjoy, and, indeed, what part the media play in their personal lives.

(Katz and Foulkes, 1962)

One initial aspect to emerge from such approaches was a focus on the 'uses and gratifications' that audiences brought to and gained from media producers. Instead of searching for 'effects' and changing behaviour, this approach concentrated instead, as James Lull has it, on 'how audience members positively influence their own media experiences' (Lull, 1995). In addition, questions about media use and how need is fulfilled were based upon an assumption that answers cannot simply be read off in any linear or direct manner from media content.

The uses and gratifications concept is usually identified as deriving from 'functionalist' theories of society. It is functionalist because it contends that audiences approach texts out of a purposeful desire to satisfy or 'gratify' necessary personal and social needs or, indeed, to 'use' media for a variety of purposeful and rational ends within a comprehensible and explicable model of social activity. Exactly how and why this happens is one of the focal points of research in this area. A key theorist and proselytiser for this approach within mass communications traditions is the aforementioned McQuail, who summarises four categories for itemising the uses and gratifications that audiences pursue. These are surveillance, personal identity, personal relationships and diversion. None of these categories are exclusive, and media forms may fulfil various aspects of these for audiences at any one time.

1. 'Surveillance' refers to the use of media in order to satisfy a need for knowledge – to comprehend what is going on in the world around audience members – 'us'. On the one hand, this need for knowledge can be satisfied by the consumption of current affairs and actuality media forms – newspapers, news bulletins, documentaries and so on. This has important bearing upon the function of media as a 'fourth estate', in relation to the status of audiences as political citizens in need of insight and guidance on the maintenance of society (p. 00). On the other hand, in order to be a social animal nowadays, we might need to know about media as an object of discussion – just to be able to communicate with other people during those 'water cooler' moments at work for instance. This point relates, of course, to consumption of celebrity scandal

generated by paparazzi in newspapers and magazines but also to keeping up with the pop charts or soap plotlines.

2. 'Personal identity' refers to the way in which media play a part in defining us. In some ways, this connects with the principles or needs labelled under surveillance but it can have rather more trite meanings, too. Thus, issues of taste come into play here – how our choices reflect our preferences for information, pleasure and so on but also, in turn, reinforce our sense of who we are. For instance, we may consider the kinds of people presented to us in factual and fictional media forms, judging and defining ourselves in relation to them. Indeed, many forms of media actively invite such judgements – talent and dating shows on television, and 'circles of shame' and 'clothing disaster' items in popular magazines, as well as opinionated newspaper columns. Critics play a part here, too, as do notions of media personalities as 'role models'. The notion of 'lifestyle' consumption seems relevant here as well, i.e. the way in which one might wish to be seen with the 'latest' music or at 'trendy' clubs and concerts.
3. 'Personal relationships' can be explored in terms of media uses and gratifications in a number of ways that build upon these two previous points. We may use media forms as a basis for the way to act in personal situations. For instance, pop songs may teach us about the rules and rituals of romance and emotions, teen soaps about being an adolescent. Knowledge of and consumption of particular types of media may open doors for us in terms of personal relationships. We join communities of consumers at movie houses and pop concerts, or in online forums and games such as *Second Life* we participate in and develop social relations. To some extent, too, media forms may offer us surrogate sociability and relationships. What we refer to here are some of the ways in which we interact with the media – talking to or 'with' personalities on screen, air or in print. Of course, we most of us recognise this as a form of harmless ritual, surrogate participation in TV talent or reality shows, for instance. We do, of course, find solace in the media, whether we're alone or otherwise. Songs may give us indicators of how to act with prospective partners but also how to cope (or otherwise) when things go wrong ('My baby left me . . .', 'Gonna wash that man right out of my hair').
4. The idea of 'diversion' relates to very familiar notions of escapism, fantasy, relaxation and so on that can be located around media use. Primary reasons why we may wish to listen to music may relate to pure pleasure or a desire to escape everyday life. Individuals seem to enjoy being scared by horror movies, moshing

in the pit at metal gigs, killing aliens in fantasy video games and sexual arousal through pornography. Occasionally this 'diversion' may be instrumental in nature – consider the way in which children might be stuck in front of a television as a surrogate activity on a rainy day or, indeed, how any of us might attempt to empty our minds of daily stresses via net or TV channel surfing or by immersing ourselves in a favourite CD.

These are intriguing, suggestive and usable ways of thinking about media consumption, which offer a means for identifying and labelling any results we might produce when thinking of why and how audiences consume media. What is interesting about the work that developed in the uses and gratifications approach to audiences is the manner in which audience members emerge as individuals engaging with media, rather than distant and amorphous constructs of market research, theory or scientific 'objectivity'. Early work by Blumler and McQuail, for example, was predicated on an exploration of the responses of 300 individuals, who were interviewed about their TV viewing and invited to categorise for themselves the nature of their uses and gratifications. But even then, out of this sizable sample, the nuances of individuals do emerge. Here's a quote from work done in 1970/71, for instance, that itemises the responses of a 40-year-old milkman who produces 8 constructions of his uses and gratifications based upon reflections about his favourite 12 shows:

1. *Covers many things – covers only one topic.*
2. *Makes me feel nostalgic – is viewed just for pleasure.*
3. *Produces feelings of frustration and helplessness – does not make me feel that way.*
4. *Entertaining; you can sit back and enjoy it with a blank mind – tells you about things that are happening.*
5. *Gives you other people's opinions and views – gives you knowledge.*
6. *Serious and heavy – light-hearted.*
7. *Challenges one's own opinions – enjoyable without having to work at it.*
8. *Like best – like least.*

Source: Blumler et al. (2003) reproduced at www.participations.org/volume%201/issue%201/1_01_blumler_chapter5.htm#_ednref3

Clearly, the exploration of uses and gratifications represents something different from the abstractions of market research and promotions or the presumptions behind the

Doing media studies

Your media uses and gratifications

Based upon the four categories outlined above, produce a brainstorm map of how you use the media and what kinds of gratifications you derive from your consumption. How easily are you able to locate your uses and gratifications within these parameters? Does anything not fit in here? Is there any way in which you feel that media do not satisfy your 'needs'? If so, why not?

idea that media produce direct and measurable effects on belief and behaviour. This approach opens up questions of the plurality of audience interpretations, recognising and affording them some space for power and self-determination. Inevitably, however, the uses and gratification approach has also engendered some criticism, even as it continues to inform aspects of media research, particularly in response to questions about the integration of new media into the lives of individuals (Ruggiero, 2000).

Some of the salient points of this criticism are worth considering, as they underline the fact that, while this approach has an application in addressing certain aspects of media use, there are other questions worth asking and agendas that are brought to bear upon investigations of audience activity. One criticism, for instance, lies in the very functionalism and individualism that uses and gratifications research explores, which relies very much upon assumptions about and ascriptions of the audience member's personality and psychology. While such aspects are important, it is suggested that the uses and gratifications approach is limited because it lacks attention to social and cultural perspectives that might have some bearing on, and conditioning of, all of those categories explored. For example, acceptable types and sources of 'information' or 'diversion' may vary considerably within particular contexts. And what happens if one has needs unfulfilled by media? In addition, criticism of the uses and gratification approach suggest that it takes a consumerist view of media use, where, like buying beans in a supermarket, individuals choose the media products that meet their needs, and it is thus circuitously goal-oriented and uncritical of the actual products on offer. For instance, what if I pursue diversions and define myself in my social relations through my consumption of pornography and its limited, misogynistic images of women?

We should recall, too, that the nature of media products and the apparent variety of meaning presented to us ('on offer') is not of the user's making. Thus, a major issue

concerns the lack of attention within the uses and gratifications approach to content other than in very broad terms, i.e. that 'news' is sought in order to aid surveillance of the world. That media forms present information in particular ways, and often particularly repetitive and circumscribed ways – despite the apparent variety on offer – might have some bearing upon what kinds of uses are available to audiences and the degree of gratification they derive from their choices.

Ultimately, then, uses and gratifications is one approach to understanding what audiences do with media, but it has not addressed a number of important issues that we might consider to be factors in media consumption and worthy of investigation. These include: social and domestic contexts and relations; the agendas and project of media organisations and producers; and, indeed, the manner in which detailed meaning is made by and derived from specific media texts.

Theorising audiences: encoding/decoding media meanings

In narratives of media studies, scholars who pinpoint limitations in the uses and gratifications framework (Corner, 1998; Morley and Brunsdon, 1980) locate an important contribution to the development of audience studies in the work of Stuart Hall. Hall's work at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) in the 1970s (p. 00) was influenced by the semiology of Roland Barthes and Umberto Eco as well as the political insights of Eco's fellow Italian Antonio Gramsci (p. 00). His approach to audiences was a reaction to how media had been studied, observing that: 'Traditionally, mass-communication research has conceptualised the process of communication in terms of a circulation circuit or loop. This model has been criticised for its linearity – sender/message/receiver – for its concentration on the level of message exchange and for the absence of a conception of the different moments as a complex structure of relations' (Hall, 1980:128). While Hall did not investigate actual audiences, he sought to develop a theoretical model for thinking of the context in which media messages are made and interpreted, of the relationship between producer, text and audience. This sense of a relationship is encapsulated in his conjunction 'encoding/decoding' (the title of his paper on this matter): messages are part of a process, encoded in texts in production and then decoded in consumption, and this process takes place within a complex social structure in which the message is not isolated. Media institutions (comprising owners and producers, with their own agendas as well as textual and professional conventions) have power to set

agendas, define 'what counts' as media content and the way that it is presented and articulated. Audiences make what they can or will of the signs, systems, meanings and so on that media forms present, as well as making their readings within the social and cultural positions which underwrite how they are disposed to read and interpret these signs. Clearly, producers and audiences share these systems of interpretation, as they do social and cultural perspectives, although, as individuals with different social identities (as men, women, black, white, working-class, professional), there are also a variety of other pressures on the resources that are brought to bear on interpretation. The overarching issue is, for Hall, one of power relations in society, in which media, and the messages they present, have a role to play. (See the next chapter for a more detailed discussion of the issue of social power and media.)

Hall offers a series of 'positions' of meaning for conceptualising the situation and parameters of sense-making for audiences in the face of the 'influence' of media messages, what they represent and indeed 'who' they represent. These are: dominant (or hegemonic; see p. 00), oppositional and negotiated.

The dominant set of ideas or meanings in media texts are those that present, invite or insist upon a 'preferred' reading amongst audiences, which, if taken on or accepted, ratifies particular ways of seeing the world. An 'oppositional' reading is one in which the preferred interpretation of a media text or message is understood but rejected by its consumer. A 'negotiated' meaning is one in which the audience take on the 'preferred' meaning but this is also tempered by 'oppositional' positions conditioned by the context of interpretation, and also by the polysemic (p. 00) nature of texts. Of course, in this relationship between production and consumption of meaning, texts are intentionally and conventionally constructed in order to anchor meaning, so all effort is made to rein in polysemia. On the other hand, one cannot guarantee how individuals will read texts, considering their position. Thus, what this model suggests is that, while interpretation is context-bound, impacting upon how we might deduce any likely result in audiences, that interpretation, like the production of meaning, is bound up in greater social structure of convention and power. In short, with all of these pressures, the message at the start of the production chain is not that which consumers take away. Thus, this tends to present a problem for models that privilege direct links between the message and the behaviour and beliefs of consumers.

Let's illustrate these ideas with a contemporary example. During the worldwide 'credit crunch' and economic crises of 2008, President George Bush decided to direct the US government to go against its free market, monetarist policies (see p. 00) and support the financial system with an injection of around \$700 billion. On

24 September 2008, Bush addressed the American nation on live TV to outline this plan. Here is some of what he said:

Good evening. This is an extraordinary period for America's economy. Over the past few weeks, many Americans have felt anxiety about their finances and their future. I understand their worry and their frustration. We've seen triple-digit swings in the stock market. Major financial institutions have teetered on the edge of collapse, and some have failed. As uncertainty has grown, many banks have restricted lending. Credit markets have frozen. And families and businesses have found it harder to borrow money.

We're in the midst of a serious financial crisis, and the federal government is responding with decisive action. We've boosted confidence in money market mutual funds, and acted to prevent major investors from intentionally driving down stocks for their own personal gain.

Most importantly, my administration is working with Congress to address the root cause behind much of the instability in our markets. Financial assets related to home mortgages have lost value during the housing decline. And the banks holding these assets have restricted credit. As a result, our entire economy is in danger. So I've proposed that the federal government reduce the risk posed by these troubled assets, and supply urgently-needed money so banks and other financial institutions can avoid collapse and resume lending.

Source: www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2008/09/20080924-10.html

As good media scholars, we would wish to see these words in the context of their delivery, of course (on television, live and direct from US Congress, Bush standing behind a lectern decorated with his emblem of office), as well as examining Bush's performance of these words. Nonetheless, this is, obviously, a formal message delivered from the most powerful man in the country to his fellow citizens, on whose behalf he wields power. It seeks to explain the current situation, to outline the nature of the crisis and, indeed, to demonstrate the action that his administration is taking. A preferred reading of this message, possibly, is one in which the threat is accepted on the terms described by the reader, who is reassured by Bush's actions, which seek to preserve the status quo on behalf of the common good. An oppositional reading might reject the overall diagnosis and solution based upon an analysis that finds fault not in some abstract root cause behind the operations of the market, but in the market and the overall system. A negotiated reading would find ground to agree with and be reassured by Bush but

perhaps wonder if this action is completely reliant or necessary, perhaps looking for other solutions but generally agreeing with the aim of maintaining the status quo. How one takes up such readings is likely to depend upon one's position within American society (or even outside it). For instance, how might the following respond to such a message: a Wall Street banker, a member of the Democratic Party, a UCLA student, a bank clerk in Idaho, a single mother in Detroit, a new home-owner in Oregon, a member of the Taliban in Afghanistan?

This message, as it is presented here, might seem quite transparent as a message with an equally transparent purpose. It is also most directly about the nature of society and the role of the powerful and their relationship with a wider constituency. What then of other messages? What is the nature of preferred, negotiated and oppositional positions and readings when audiences consume fiction, films, advertisements and newspaper photographs, or radio shows and popular music and the variety of other media in which political issues are not dealt with in such obvious fashion? We have already touched upon some of the ways of reading such media messages throughout this book (see the Chanel analysis on pages 00 for a detailed discussion). These have been rather hypothetical and schematic, however – conducted by the authors as media analysts. If

your review our analyses, you will see, perhaps, traces of Hall's model of the relationship between text and a hypothetical or 'implied' reader. What then, we ask, of the actual, living readers who consume and make sense of media texts?

Discovering the audience: media, context and meaning

We should understand that Hall's work came out of a moment in which 'theory' occupied a privileged position for many in the academic community concerned with media messages. Any empirical work on the actual opinions, preferences and activities of audiences was viewed as likely to produce little more than 'market research' (Brunsdon and Morley, 1999). Thus, Hall is akin to those theorists discussed in the previous chapter, whose assumptions tended to 'produce' audiences and their potential responses. However, Hall offered his model as something in need of exploration, refinement and testing, well aware of the distinction between 'implied' readers and people with real lives who exist in real contexts. This realisation, for Hall, and for us now, in considering audiences in relation to our own perceptions of media meaning, offers important qualifications for how we proceed.

A student of Hall's by the name of David Morley took on the model of encoding/decoding in order to explore the way in which actual audiences from different backgrounds responded to a specific, popular BBC TV show of the late 1970s called *Nationwide*. This show appeared in the early evening and took on a 'magazine' format that combined current affairs stories with more lightweight material. It was, in effect, the epitome of 'everyday' television, neither overly 'hard' in its news and political coverage nor wholly 'ephemeral' or 'diverting' like material clearly signalled as 'entertainment' (comedy, drama and so on). This balance was of particular interest at a time when the UK was experiencing an unsettled economy and a great deal of industrial unrest and political polarisation as a result.

The programme had already been the object of a close-textual reading by Morley, in conjunction with Charlotte Brunsdon (as well as others of the CCCS) (Brunsdon *et al.*, 1978). Here they focused on its mode of address to its implied audience and the particularly mainstream social values and worldview it presented in its amalgam of stories and styles (Brunsdon, *et al.*, 1978). Morley arranged for 29 different groups of 5–10 individuals to view episodes of *Nationwide* (e.g. those covering the annual budget announcements and so on). Members of groups were selected on the basis of their socio-economic backgrounds in order to explore whether or not these would have any

Key thinker

Stuart Hall (1932–)

Stuart Hall is one of a handful of theorists responsible for the prodigious growth of media and cultural studies. He took over from Richard Hoggart (p. 00) as director of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies and oversaw the development of an incredible array of influential works, the legacy of which can be felt in this book and across the field. His cultural analysis has always been 'engaged' with the nature of the society in which we find ourselves, seeking to support progressive practices across media, politics, education and so on. In the 1970s he paid attention to the nature of media panics (p. 00) concerning street crime in *Policing the Crisis* (Hall *et al.*, 1978) and the way in which this was tied to racist perceptions of young black men. His analysis of contemporary power and hegemonic struggle anticipated the political terrain of the 1980s and the rise of the New Right. Overall, his work has proven to be optimistic in identifying ways in which analysis and popular struggle can take on the powerful and vested interests, by winning position if not always being triumphant in the end.

Key text

The death of the author and the birth of the reader

An important development theorising the activity of the consumer of the text came out of the semiology of Roland Barthes. In an essay of 1968, the French theorist announced, rather provocatively, that the author was dead (*La Mort de L'Auteur*). He did not mean that any one particular writer was literally or suddenly dead or redundant, but presented the logical conclusion of semiotic investigation and the manner in which meaning systems, structures and signification are culturally located. He sought to challenge the notion that any writer – the Author with a capital A (or any other producer of a text) is the final arbiter of meaning, residing as an authority figure over their work. Barthes suggested that such a focus has, at worst, tended to lead to interpretative criticism that seeks qualification for meaning in the individual's biographical detail or their pronouncements about their 'intention,' when the very language they use escapes them. His announcement of the 'death' of the author acknowledged, on the one hand, how the producers of texts are situated in a complex web of meanings and ideas that inflect the 'originality' and 'intention' of their enterprise. On the other, it acknowledged the vital act and role of interpretation – the existence of the reader in making meaning.

This idea proved very provocative, particularly in the Anglophone world, where Barthes was too often taken

very literally, rather than being seen to offer a theoretical treatise on language and the political quality of individualism in modern society, an idea evinced in the elevation of authors and other creative workers to a privileged status. Likewise, and perhaps symptomatic of the heady challenges of the 1960s, the overt radicalism of the idea upset conservative thinkers. However, Barthes' notion, when translated beyond the literary work, offered a great deal to the theorisation of the audience as 'active'.

Of importance here is a distinction between what Barthes' calls the readerly and writerly text – concepts derived from his study of literary style but, like his concept of authorship, ones which are suggestive in thinking about aspects of media. For Barthes, the 'readerly' text is one in which structures and rhetorical strategies are highly conventional and the spaces available for interpretation are highly circumscribed. To some extent, this would describe a majority of the generic, formulaic and 'transparent' or straightforward nature of much media product. On the other hand, the 'writerly' text is more experimental and indeterminate, while the actual activity of 'writing' that Barthes conceptualises lies in the moment of the reader's interaction with any text, where meaning is produced, sometimes soaring off in ways that cannot be reduced to any prescriptive or descriptive formulae. Whether or not these categories lend themselves to mass, collectively produced media forms is another matter, but if readerly and writerly are taken to describe the process of interpretation, then this may all depend upon the nature of the actual consumer and what they do with media texts.

correlation with their interpretations in some traceable form. Groups, including bank managers and working-class apprentices, tended towards a 'dominant' reading, according with what Morley interpreted as *Nationwide's* own values. Those who produced 'negotiated' readings included teachers, university students and trade union officials. Those who rejected *Nationwide*, producing 'oppositional' readings, included black further education students and trade union shop stewards. Overall, the results tended to confirm Hall's model of interpretation but not in a consistent fashion that supported a direct correlation between social position and receptivity to the 'dominant' reading of the values presented in the text.

In short, then, Morley's empirical audience research located actual audiences in their guise as individuals and role as members of recognisable socio-economic groups, within a tangible social and historical context. How they made meaning was clearly a complex issue, and not reducible to the banal observation that 'different people

read media message in different ways'. Perhaps the whole story did not quite emerge in this study. Morley's research was rather artificial in the way in which it was conducted – organising groups of similar individuals to watch pre-recorded shows in a university setting, out of their familiar context of domestic spaces, at particular times and with (or without) family members, friends and so on around them. The lesson is that such factors are clearly worthy of consideration if we really want to find out what audiences get up to as audiences, the way in which they make sense of media meanings and the way in which media 'mean' as part of their lives; or, indeed, the way in which media forms are often relatively peripheral and 'weak'.

Where the exploration of methods and questions about audiences and contexts has been particularly productive is in a range of studies influenced by feminist theory and approaches. Researchers have been particularly attuned to the domestic and social contexts of consumption, theorising pleasure, the part that gender plays in audience

Key theory

Feminism

'First wave feminism' is a term that is usually applied to the European and American suffragette movement of the early twentieth century, which gained the vote for women. 'Second wave feminism' grew out of the changes and radical challenges of the 1960s.

The initial contribution of feminists in this period – outlined in groundbreaking work by writers such as Simone de Beauvoir (1997), Germaine Greer (1976), Kate Millet (1972), Shulamith Firestone (1971), etc. – was to identify the inequality and injustice of a society that disempowered women in every possible way. In essence, men held power and the jobs and positions that made them powerful – a power that was deemed to be self-evidently the result of the natural state of affairs manifest in biological differences. Central to feminist analysis was the dictum that 'the personal is political', locating the manner in which inequalities were present in the domestic sphere and in the nature of personal relationships. As this situation was identified and critiqued, it was deemed necessary to do something about it and change things – thus the notion of 'women's liberation'. Feminism was about confrontation of inequality and sexism, as well as about education, which sought to enlighten and liberate women collectively and individually through a process of 'consciousness raising'.

Inequality was something to be addressed, by exploring the experience of all women (all members of an oppressed group and by implication all potential feminists) and by asking some difficult questions about the structures, societies, culture and assumptions that held women back. By this we mean the religious and social mores that deemed that women were second-class citizens, and the medical and scientific assumptions about their physical, mental and intellectual capacities that thus made them unfit for certain kinds of work.

In their attention to media and its social role, feminists have asked questions about three categories. First, there has been an attention to women in media industries, which has explored the sexual make-up of institutions; questions of political economy (who owns the media); how, when and where media operators are trained; the working environment of organisations (regulations, contracts, hours); and the cultural practices of media workers, etc. Secondly, feminists have been concerned with the images and representations of women, asking how men and women are represented in media forms. What range of media representations is available? How does form (text, rhetoric, genre) relate to such images? Finally, and very productively in the context of this chapter, theorists have also paid attention to the gendered nature of audiences, asking: how do men and women make sense of (reading, viewing, pursuing, discussing) media texts and in what ways does gender impact upon this process?

activity and, indeed, the role that 'gendered' texts or genres play in the lives of audiences.

The relationship of feminist theorists with female audiences and their media consumption, in particular, has been a very interesting one for what it tells us about the relationship of theorist and subject, and the way that assumptions in the field have altered.

Early feminist approaches to media drew attention to the nature and impact of images of women. For instance, Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963/1984) explored magazines for women, concluding that articles, pictures and editorials in total emphasised a vision of domestic, motherly, middle-class femininity, presented for readers to emulate. Molly Haskell outlined two pole positions for the way in which women were viewed and treated in the title of her book, *From Reverence to Rape* (Haskell, 1974). This study of Hollywood 'weepies', movies aimed at women, concluded that, whatever 'exceptional' and inspiring roles appeared for women, characters always ended up subsuming their vitality as independent women in a romance with a man. Thus, 'The domestic and the

romantic are entwined, one redeeming the other, in the theme of self-sacrifice, which is the mainstay and oceanic force, high tide and low ebb, of the woman's film' (Haskell, 1974: 157). Analyses such as these then posited a view of media forms contributing to the 'subjugation' of women, whatever their class, race or sexuality. Media texts, as part of wider cultural production, are seen as contributing to the social construction of femininity (see p. 00), and the limited expectations placed upon women, who are defined through looks and body, for instance, at the expense of skills, mind or ability.

While negative images of women abound across all media forms, of particular concern for theorists such as those cited above, as well as many others (e.g. Laura Mulvey, p. 00, and see also Tuchman *et al.*, 1978; McRobbie, 1991), is the fact that media products aimed at, consumed and enjoyed by women are especially limited. Thus, such approaches to media meanings evidence a concern with media 'effect' or influence, for the way in which women are located in a culture saturated with images that present a rather limited set of roles for women and ideas about

women. It naturally follows that actual women learn from these, are thus socialised, and grow into the circumscribed roles available to them. This model is one that presents women as cultural dupes, complicit in their own oppression through their consumption. As we've seen in the previous chapter, and discuss in more detail in Chapter 11, such perspectives are based upon a deep suspicion of media messages and forms as well as the nature of the audience members themselves.

There were two problems with these approaches and insights. As the Dutch scholar Joke Hermes has commented on the literature on women's magazines, the resulting pessimistic and often angry evaluations constructed and assumed what happened to consumers, 'there was no theoretical or other need to interview readers' (Hermes, 1995: 2). Likewise, and notwithstanding the fact that analyses of representations and texts have had value and continue to inform media studies, a major issue for feminists who produced critical evaluations of media forms for women in particular, evincing concern for audiences, was that many of them consumed and enjoyed them too!

TV scholar Charlotte Brunsdon has described 'the opposition between the feminist subject and housewife object of research', and how these positions reveal 'the historical construction of these identities' (Brunsdon, 2000: 53). Such ideas resonate with our discussion in the previous chapter of the context in which ideas are formed and of how theorists have 'produced' audiences in their thought, but of importance here is Brunsdon's exploration of the way that such distinctions have fluctuated. This is particularly due to a thrust in media studies that has explored and accentuated 'positive' aspects of media as popular culture (see p. 00), and as a resource in people's lives, in which pleasure and audience have been taken seriously.

Brunsdon, in her book *The Feminist, The Housewife, and the Soap Opera* (2000), has explored the way in which feminists evaluated their own pleasures (see also Hermes, 1995; Vance, 1984) and how they turned to explore audience activities, in order to better understand how they make meaning and the role that media play in the everyday lives of consumers. Very broadly, and in conjunction with the kinds of studies of subcultures and fans discussed below, there has been a 'turn to the audience' since the 1980s, with researchers proceeding with a more respectful and empirical approach to consumers as people. A good example to illustrate this point is Jackie Stacey's *Star Gazing* (1993). This was written within the field of film studies and during a period dominated by theoretical constructions of audiences as 'spectators', informed by ideological and psychoanalytical approaches. Stacey investigated how women understood Hollywood stars in the 1940s and 1950s, drawing on letters and questionnaires

from over 300 filmgoers. Stacey's work demonstrated how cultural and national location impacted upon the ways in which audiences related to films, how they identified with stars and what meanings and purposes 'escapism' held for them.

Let's explore some insights about the relationship of female audiences and media with a brief look at genre. We have suggested elsewhere that genre is a particularly valuable way of organising meaning and audiences for producers, and also the importance of it for audiences in recognising familiar pleasures (p. 00). Media theorists have also explored the way in which genres have a particularly 'gendered' quality. Aspects of pop music, film, TV, radio, newspapers and magazines, for instance, have all been studied in this way (e.g. Whiteley, 1997; Hermes, 1995; Winship, 1987). This is not simply to say that media products are just directed at women as a particular audience but that content and form, as well as aspects of delivery and distribution, accord with the nature of women's lives, social roles and wider cultural expectations or conventions and connotations of femininity. For instance, the way in which radio and TV schedules, historically, have organised programming over the day has reflected the assumption that mothers or housewives are at home. Hermes' findings on women's magazines – with their focus on family, cooking, fashion, gossip, etc. – suggest that they have utility in women's lives because they are easily picked up and put down over the course of a day's busy domestic duties. The most prodigious field for research here, if not for audience research in general, has been in TV studies and, in particular, the attention given to soap opera.

Soaps have had a historical status within academic approaches to media and in wider cultural perspectives as the acme of superficiality and ephemera. The endlessly repetitive story-lines concerning romances and tangled webs of personal relationships, in the assumption of a largely passive female audience, have meant that this genre has often been seen as having little value.

Brunsdon (2000) outlines how feminists considered soap, as a typical 'women's genre', as a potential site for research because of this negativity. However, the pleasure that female viewers took from soap opera was surprising to feminists, as soap opera has an emphasis on the domestic sphere, which for them was a site of oppression and limitation. Based upon the pleasures expressed by female audiences in the face of the travails of women characters, caused by men, family, friendships and life in general, however, the genre has been 'recuperated' as offering positive and progressive pleasures in which 'feminine competence is recognised' (Brunsdon, 1997: 15).

Christine Geraghty, for instance, has suggested that 'the soap's basic premise is that women are understandable and rational, a premise that flies in the face of much TV drama'



Soaps have been explored as particularly ‘gendered texts’, which offer female audiences progressive pleasures based around strong female roles and portraits of domestic competence.

(Geraghty, 1991: 47). In this genre, women are seen as skilled in their emotional abilities, and narratives focus on relationships being built, managed and maintained. Therefore, it can be argued that soap opera celebrates aspects of femininity and that this is recognised by female audiences in particular, whose own ‘repertoires’ are brought to bear in recognising, responding to and taking pleasure in such texts.

What then can the new media scholar take away from this outline of feminist-inspired research? Above all, approaches to audiences informed by feminism have been innovative in the adaptation and development of methods for exploring consumption and contexts (individual methods are outlined in detail in the second part of this chapter). For instance, we’ve cited Stacey’s work already, which drew upon letters from respondents (see also (Ang, 1985). Researchers such as Dorothy Hobson drew upon the focus group format in gathering together groups of working women in their lunch breaks, in order to get them

Doing media studies

Everyday media use

In what ways does context and our social identity affect our media consumption and the meanings we make from our favoured texts? How can the new researcher begin to explore such questions in meaningful fashion? An exercise that you could try would be to get a group of friends together of both sexes, in order to discuss your media consumption in general – what you consume, where, how and what it means to you. You could also try focusing the discussion by getting your impromptu group to examine a media text together – reading a women’s or men’s magazine, or watching a ‘gendered’ TV programme (e.g. a soap, or a ‘sports’ programme, which might stereotypically work as feminised and masculinised respectively). How might you direct discussion to tease out the kinds of issues that we’re interested in as scholars? What kinds of questions could you ask? What kinds of results or insights would you expect to gain? (See p. 00 for a discussion of relevant methods).

to talk about their pleasure in soap operas. Interviews and ethnographic observation (Gray, 1992; Seiter *et al.*, 1991; Thornton, 1993) as well as ‘autoethnography’, have proven important in exploring domestic and social contexts for consumption. The feminist dictum that ‘the personal is political’ is perhaps partly responsible for the appearance of the personal pronoun in theoretical work. This is not to eschew our attempts at critical distance or objectivity. That authors regularly now insert themselves into their work as the ever present ‘I’ has been productive, as researchers reflect upon and acknowledge their own role and part in their work as individuals and media consumers.

Subcultures and fandom

We now turn to consider two related concepts that have proven useful for understanding particular types of media consumers. These concepts are, first, subcultures and, secondly, fandom. Both ideas have something to tell us about everyday media use amongst groups and individuals to whom particular media forms are more than banal or passing ephemera, and for whom the manner of media consumption has a consciously determining and active role in their identities.

The concept of subculture derives from anthropology and sociology – particularly within the latter discipline – and interest in theories and instances of social deviance,

i.e. how individuals and groups go against the accepted mores and habits of societies. The concept has proven highly influential in the field of cultural studies, which is where it has fed into aspects of attempts to make sense of media consumption. The term does not pertain solely to media use (if at all in some cases), but where media use is important to a subculture, the category is instructive.

Subcultures

are identifiable, if not necessarily immediately 'visible', minority groups in society who share particular values and habits that are distinctive to that group and sometimes at odds with those of the greater culture to which its members belong.

'Subcultures must exhibit a distinctive enough shape and structure to make them identifiably different from their 'parent' culture . . . They must be focused around certain activities, values, certain use of material artifacts, territorial spaces, etc. which significantly differentiate them from the wider culture . . . but there must also be significant things which bind and articulate them with the "parent" culture' (Clarke and Jefferson, 1975: 10).

While subcultures have a long history, the category has proven important in identifying the ways in which young people in particular have responded to social change and aspects of mass media in modern consumer cultures since the Second World War. Indeed, contemporary subcultures are, in part, a result (albeit an unintended one) of media companies responding directly to young people as emergent consumers – identified in marketing terms through 'the teenager', and 'produced' as a group perceived to have its own needs (social, psychological, cultural) towards which mass cultural products could be directed.

Across the world, the impact of the Second World War led to social upheaval and long-term changes – economic, physical, intellectual, cultural, political, sexual and so on. In the UK, for instance, traditional urban communities were being altered by post-war rebuilding (moving people out of slums and housing damaged by bombs), new educational and workplace opportunities, the growth of the consumer society, immigration of non-indigenous peoples and so on. In this context, theorists have reflected upon the rise of a range of spectacular youth subcultures originating amongst the urban working class, who were most affected by these changes. Thus, arose the 'Teddy Boys', 'Mods', 'Rockers', 'Skinheads', 'Suedeheads' and later 'Punks'. It has been suggested that such groups offer community, a sense of belonging in the face of change and disruption to traditional social organisation about which one can do little, especially if young. For the urban working class in the UK, for example, post-war prosperity – the acquisition of goods such as cars, washing machines, televisions and so on – has been blamed for the atrophy of the kinds of community spirit and culture necessitated by poverty and oppression. Home comfort and entertainment – particular signalled by the coming of television (later, home computers) enhanced the importance and isolation of domestic space and family units at the expense of collective experiences (in the street, pubs, dancehalls, cinemas and so on).

Subcultural groups came to attention in particular because of a series of disturbances and the formation of a continuing moral panic around 'youth' (Cohen, 1972). On the one hand, this moral panic concerned levels of education and threats to culture arising from the consumption of movies, popular music, magazines, comics – all usually of American origin (see also p. 00). But this panic also had something to do with the 'deviant' nature of what young people did as groups, when compared with previous

Youth subcultures are sometimes subtle and hidden from the 'mainstream', other times they are spectacular in appearance



generations, and particularly in the nature of what and how they consumed media and other consumer goods. Thus, the groups identified above – as well as more recent groups such as ‘Goths’, ‘Emos’, ‘Ravers’, ‘B-Boys’, ‘Headbangers’, ‘Junglists’ and so on, have been associated with the genres of music they consume and define as acceptable, what they wear, their haircuts and jewellery, and which clubs and locales they frequent, as well as the kinds of drinks and illegal substances they prefer (or reject, of course). That these things seem to be core to the lives of those within subcultures has been a cause for concern.

Subcultures may seem, when seen from the outside, confusing and sometimes very challenging to ‘mainstream’ society. In response, theorists have sought to ‘read’ them for how they signify semiotically and the kinds of meanings that are conveyed in the activities of participants, and how they define themselves through what they consume. *Resistance Through Rituals* (Hall and Jefferson, 1975/1991), the title of one of the first books on the topic from Birmingham’s CCCS, reveals something of this approach, as well as the moment of its origin and the theories informing subcultural analysis. The term ‘resistance’ indicates its debt to the political thought of Antonio Gramsci and ideas of social struggle (p. 00), while ‘rituals’ was a reference to Roland Barthes’ borrowing anthropological insights from the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss (p. 00). Dick Hebdige, another graduate of Hall’s Centre, developed the idea of a subculture as a text in his book *Subculture the Meaning of Style* (Hebdige, 1979). Here, semiology, together with Barthesian ideas of ‘bricolage’ and ‘homology’, were utilised to examine how certain young people conducted ‘semiotic guerrilla warfare’ (a phrase borrowed from Umberto Eco (1975/1986)).

In Hebdige’s work, subcultures are interesting because they are evidence of consumers doing things beyond their allotted role of passively and compliantly digesting what is given to them. Faced with relatively circumscribed social resources, they challenge or ‘resist’ the way that the world is or how it is offered to them, not through any coherent political programme or action (in this sense subcultures are not ‘counter-cultures’) but via the kinds of rituals they follow and the style that they express. Thus, individuals and the groups to which they belong win ‘space’ for themselves, create community and define their values by a process of ‘bricolage’, which means reconfiguring the conventional meanings of the artefacts they consume and the way that they are consumed. The concept of homology refers to the ‘symbolic’ fit between subcultural lifestyles, disposition and attitudes, that everything that marks them out as distinctive has meaning – from the safety pin through the nose of the punk and the shaven head of the skinhead to the black dress of the goth.

In this, all subcultures of interest to us to some extent represent a relationship with the nature of contemporary consumption. Often, subcultures embrace consumption and take it to extremes that, while not always spectacular – as with the New Romantics of the 1980s – can serve to unnerve the dominant culture. (New Romantics wore glamorous clothes but overtly challenged the signifiers of gender boundaries in what they wore and the way that they made themselves up.) Sometimes, subcultures reject consumer society: punk’s recycled ‘dustbin’ wardrobe, for instance, as well as the puritanical rejection of stimulants amongst the ‘straight edge’ (see www.straightedge.com/) in the context of the rise of acquisitiveness and hedonism in the 1980s.

Of interest to us as media theorists is the role that media play in subcultures, the way in which subcultures make use of media artefacts for the meanings that they are perceived to have and how these ‘speak to’ and are made to have meaning for such groups. While many youth groups are associated with particular types of music, therefore – the relationship of American ‘B’-boys and rap music for instance, to the ‘ravers’ of the 1980s and acid house – not all subcultures are defined by this area. Choices of film, television, magazine and increasingly, online activity, are also of primary importance to particular subcultures. In addition, we should attend to the various responses of the media themselves to subcultures, whether in generating moral panics or in terms of recognition or even of appropriation of subcultural meanings. Hebdige calls this last process ‘recuperation’, one in which ‘Youth cultural styles may begin by issuing symbolic challenges, but they must end by establishing new sets of conventions; by creating new commodities, new industries or rejuvenating old ones’ (Hebdige, 1979: 96). Thus, the signs of subcultures – dress, musical preferences, activities (dance, language and so on) become converted into mass-produced objects. This process and these frames for comprehending subcultures may also aid us in exploring the related category of the ‘fan’ and ‘fandom’.

‘Fan’ is derived from the word fanatic, a term that guides the dominant ways that such individuals have been viewed. Joli Jensen suggests that these relate to a view of fans collectively as a ‘hysterical crowd’ or alone as an ‘obsessed individual’ (Jensen, 1992: 9). The collective image is reinforced by the sight and sound of crowds at football matches or screaming mobs at pop concerts – from the days of Frank Sinatra to the Beatles, and more recent manifestations. The individual fanatic is exemplified by figures such as John Lennon’s murderer, Mark Chapman, John Hinckley, who attempted to assassinate Ronald Reagan, and repeated instances of celebrity stalkers and, indeed, celebrity fanatics, such as Chris Crocker with his YouTube dedications to Britney Spears. When Jensen first

Case study

What is Emo?



Emo is a useful category for thinking about the role of media in contemporary subcultures and how they originate. Emo is actually a label that has been applied to various bands who may or may not collectively constitute a musical genre. Emo, or emotional hardcore music, has been identified with 1990s bands such as Fugazi, Jimmy Eat World and, more recently, My Chemical Romance and Panic at the Disco (that such bands reject the label itself is worthy of note). The label then extends to fans of the bands, who are, in turn, particularly recognisable in their dress and habits.

Those who might identify themselves as Emo, or are labelled by others as belonging to an Emo subculture, are, stereotypically, described as effete in appearance and manner – men and women dress in similar ways, blurring ‘obvious’ gender boundaries – with long, lank hair, black dress, buckles, jewellery and canvas-style shoes. In this sense, the Emo look shares something with goth subculture, which originated in the 1980s as an offshoot of punk, as well as aspects of stylings associated with followers of the independent and alternative music scene of that decade (Hodkinson, 2002).

Readers who style themselves as Emo will find much that is remiss with this brief account (we’ve got the terms all wrong, no doubt), but recently it has been the centre of a number of developments that are typical of subcultures. First, there is the debate between bands and followers over the ‘authentic’ nature of what Emo is – musically and culturally; accusations over bands ‘selling-out’; and the appearance of Emo fashions in high-street stores suggesting a moment of recuperation. Secondly, Emo has attracted the attentions of non-music-based and non-sympathetic media organs, forming the basis for a minor moral panic. This centres upon the apparently maudlin message and look of bands such as MCR and its followers, and a link (whether actual or imagined) with teen suicides and online forums and sites dedicated to the topic of suicide. More recently, as the subculture has expanded and travelled beyond

its Anglo-American roots, its members have engendered attention and hostility – notably in Mexico, as *Time* magazine reports below. Here one gets a sense of the recognisable aspects of a subculture that has attained ‘stereotype’ status, and its relationship with other groups and the perceived ‘norms’ of dominant culture:

Mexico’s Emo-Bashing Problem

By Ioan Grillo/Mexico City, 27 March 2008

The emo subculture probably existed in your high school before the term even bloomed, the latest movement on a continuum represented by goths in the ‘80s and alternative rockers in the ‘90s. In yearbooks, they’re the kids who wear exaggerated haircuts and immerse themselves in moody music. In short: the kids jocks have been beating up for decades.

Emos are just one of the colorful youth cultures popular in the US and Europe that have swept over the Rio Grande as the nation opens up its economy and politics and a new generation grows up with the internet and cable TV. Punks, goths, rockabilies, rastas, break-dancers, skaters and metallers all now pace Mexican streets, adorn its plazas and spray paint its walls. But while most of the trends have met with a begrudging acceptance, emos have provoked a violent backlash. As well as running riot in Queretaro, a mob also attacked emos in the heart of Mexico City this month.

Furthermore, emos complain they are being increasingly threatened and assaulted by smaller groups on the streets on a daily basis. ‘It’s getting dangerous for us to go out now. We get shouted at and spat on. We get things thrown at us. There is so much hate out there,’ said Santino Bautista, a 16-year-old emo high school student sitting in a Mexico City plaza alongside other teenagers in tight black jeans and dark makeup.

The attackers, catalogued as ‘anti-emos’, include some from other urban tribes such as punks, metallers and cholos but many are just ordinary working-class teenagers and young men. They deride the emos for being posers who are overly sentimental and accuse them of robbing from other music genres. With roots in Washington, DC, in the 1980s, emo bands play a style of rock that borrows much from punk and indie rock. They focus on exploring their emotions (hence the name) with a particular dwelling on typical teenage depression.

Source: www.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,1725839,00.html

Doing media studies

Subcultures and media

Do you belong to an identifiable subculture? If not, are you able to identify a contemporary group that might fit the bill?

Based upon any subcultural group you are able to locate, itemise its distinguishing features and activities. What kinds of media consumption, if any, characterise this group? How might the concept of homology aid in explaining these features?

Is this group already 'known' to the media itself or is it 'hidden'? If so, where does it feature and how is it represented? Is this representation positive or negative in any way?

If you do not belong to this group, how would you go about 'getting close' to it in order to explore how it works and what it means for participants? Even if you do belong, what kinds of approach do you think might work in getting close in order to explore this group and its media consumption?

made her observations, 'fandom' as a 'practice' was relatively unexplored. While negative associations endure, studies of fandom, informed by the more 'respectful' attitude of theorists towards media consumers, have proliferated as part of the wider exploration of the way in which audience members are active in their interpretation of media texts, and the way that these contribute to the construction of their identity and social participation (Cook and Bernink, 1999).

As with the label subculture, fan does not refer simply to a relationship with mass media. It seems that one can be a fan of anything, although it would be unusual to apply the term to an academic who had spent her life reading, collecting and analysing the works of T.S. Eliot, when compared to, say, an aficionado of Spongebob Squarepants cartoons. We might argue over the relative merits of these cultural texts but the distinction between them and the relative cultural respectability of each in our society, and the regard for the affiliation one shows to each, indicates something of the limits of fan as a label. The term is also often used quite casually to describe anyone who might show some affection or a regular devotion to something – watching *X-Factor* every week, or buying *Lucky Luke* comic books. However, the longer 'fanatic' seems to suggest some greater attachment, and our comparison might also suggest, perhaps, an attachment to something that is perceived to be not quite worthy

of such attention. After all, one can probably gain a reputable, well-paid teaching post sharing an appreciation of Eliot and his works with students but it might be a little harder to achieve this based upon a knowledge and affection for the denizens of *Bikini Bottom*.

We would suggest, then, that what marks out the fan (at least in the way we wish to employ the term), is a commitment and attachment that is distinct from the regular consumer. In this, their consumption compares to the habits of those in subcultural groups. A useful way of thinking about fandom further, perhaps, is as one way of consuming media within a whole set of possible and dynamic relations. Thus, one way of defining fandom is through relations of 'taste'. Fans resist 'dominant cultural hierarchies' (Jenkins, 1992: 17–18), considering texts from their chosen interest to be of 'good taste', treating them 'as if they merited the same degree of attention and appreciation as canonical texts' (i.e. those things officially sanctioned in society as respectable, such as Eliot's poetry or Shakespeare's plays). Aficionados, in turn, mark out the objects of fandom as superior to the rest of the fare on offer across different media forms. Interestingly, and while stereotypes of fans of science fiction or fantasy as 'geeks' abound, there is little that is common or consistent across the 'objects' of fandom. Compare, for instance, the work of a rock band such as the Grateful Dead (who have their own distinctive followers – 'Deadheads') and devotees of the film *The Big Lebowski* (dir. Cohen and Cohen, 1998) (who hold conventions centred on Jeff Bridge's character, Dude) with collectors of Euro-Cult cinema (see below). With no obvious or consistent connections, what defines the objects of fandom are the practices and devotion of fans that accrue around them (Hills, 2002).

It is worth dwelling upon the concept of taste for a moment in order to fully grasp the role it plays in the establishment of social hierarchies within fandom and in fandom's relationship with the wider culture (Hills, 2002). Here, theorists of fandom have found the work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu useful (see p. 00). In his studies of French society, Bourdieu originated a concept of 'cultural capital': 'a possession of cultural and symbolic power working to produce and reinforce social distinctions' (Hartley *et al.*, 2002: 45). Bourdieu sought to describe the ways in which taste could be explained schematically, rather than accepted as subjective and innate in individuals with taste. For Bourdieu, taste was naturalised in relation to economic capital, supporting social inequalities: the powerful, and their cultural preferences (in art, their manners, design of house, clothing, etc.), seem effortlessly, naturally, superior, and deserving of the rank.

Within fandom, for fans at least, their taste and commitment to the objects of their devotion is what marks

Fans are a highly visible sector of the active audience



them out from other consumers and, indeed, within the fan community. John Tulloch (Tulloch and Jenkins, 1995) has described fans as a ‘powerless elite’: they wield little power in society but mark themselves out as an ‘elite’ though their knowledge and validation of the media they consume. They are powerless, too, in relation to the actual management and production of their favoured products. They are unable to influence the content of their favourite media texts (when the quality or integrity of a TV programme is perceived to be in decline, for instance) nor, in most cases, are they able to halt the cancellation of the production of output (comics, recordings, TV shows) when it is no longer economically viable (see the discussion of fans and producers below).

In his book *Textual Poachers* (1992), Henry Jenkins studied fans of the science fiction TV programme (‘space opera’) *Star Trek* and the manner in which this show has meaning for them, in particular for the way in which they appropriate it, making it part of their lives and adding new meanings to it. The term textual poachers derives from the work of French theorist Michel de Certeau, who wrote of how, in cultural terms in everyday life, the disempowered were like trespassers on the grounds of the powerful, wherein they would ‘poach’ dominant meanings and values and make them their own (a concept not unlike those behind the theories of subculture). The way that fans do this can be quite personal, in their relationship with their favoured texts, but is also manifest through the production of their own texts, such as stories, art and songs. Fan activity also extends to organising fan clubs, conventions, producing fanzines (fan magazines), amateur

fan films, T-shirts and other media artefacts. These are distributed to fellow fans via specialised networks and, increasingly, over the internet. In this creation of community, belonging and shared meanings, fandom again compares with youth subcultures, particularly in the way that as ‘poachers’, fans appropriate meaning and make it their own and integral to their identities.

Fan fiction ‘written and read by fans themselves centering on the object of their fandom’ (Jenkins, 1992: 45), is sometimes known as ‘slash’ fiction, a term that derives originally from fan stories that fantasised about the sexual pairing of Captain Kirk and Mr Spock from the series (Kirk/Spock, thus ‘slash’). Slash fiction is incredibly popular within fandom of different descriptions and can be easily located on the internet. Often, such work, as well as other fan productions, infringes the intellectual property rights (p. 00) of the creators or causes problems when fantasies are generated around figures that, while fictional, are under the age of consent (e.g. slash fiction about Harry Potter characters for instance). Jenkins notes then that fans can come into conflict with the producers of the media texts because they are using the ideas of others, therefore ‘The relationship between fan and producer, then, is not always a happy or comfortable one and is often charged with mutual suspicion, if not open conflict’ (Jenkins, 1992: 32). A recent example of the ways in which fans have conflicted with producers was when the animated sitcom *Family Guy* was cancelled by the US Fox network. After initial discontent was expressed about this decision in online message boards, online petitions were created to show that there would be support for a new season of the

Case study

Euro-cult cinema fandom



Euro-cult cinema is a category determined by and used commonly within the international fan community (see www.lovelockandload.net and www.fabpress.com). It refers to low budget horror and thriller films that emerged from Western Europe from the late 1950s onwards. These films, which were once regarded as banal Hollywood imitations or 'trash', like many fan objects have become highly revered by their followers and transformed into something with more cultural value. The *giallo* can be seen as one of the more popular subareas of Euro-cult cinema. The *giallo* film was based on pulp crime novels that were popular in Italy from the mid-twentieth century; this led to the production of film adaptations of several *giallo* stories. Although some of the films were released internationally, audiences outside Italy did not get to experience the *giallo* until the home video boom of the early 1980s, when low-budget films were released by enterprising home video labels to meet demand. In the early 1990s, British and American horror fans learnt about the *giallo* through fanzine publications, such as Britain's *Giallo Pages* and America's *European Trash Cinema*, which created interest and paved the way for the generation of a Euro-cult cinema fan culture centred partly around the *giallo* film. Around this time, a British video label called Redemption was formed and released a number of *gialli* in their original language and original cinematic aspect ratio. This allowed a new generation of films fans to experience the *giallo* for the first time. The advent of DVD led to more *gialli* being released, particularly in America and Italy. Recent labels, such as the British

company Shameless, continue to release titles on DVD.

What is particularly interesting about Euro-cult cinema fandom is the forms of fan production that take place within the community. New media has allowed fans to not only have a greater level of interaction with the community but also to move from amateur fan production to professional production. An example of this would be the British fan publishing house FAB Press. Originally, FAB Press published the fanzine *Flesh and Blood* and then moved towards producing limited runs of lavish books, several devoted to well-known *giallo* director Dario Argento. Another example would be the website lovelockandload.com. Not only does the website sell fan-produced T-shirts, which feature designs taken from Euro-cult film posters, but it also has a message board where fans from all across the world discuss their fan interests. Some of the participants build fan-made DVDs using video taken from commercial DVD releases and add English language audio or subtitles. These fan DVDs are not sold commercially and are only traded with fellow fans. They make available films which might not be released in English speaking territories. A CD containing mixes of Euro-cult soundtracks has also been produced.

By looking at this example, we can see how fan production has changed: digital technologies are being used to produce texts of a professional standard. We can also see how fans 'poach' from texts in order to create their own artefacts.

Further reading

- Gallant, C. (2000) *Art of darkness: the cinema of Dario Argento*, Guildford: FAB.
- Hutchings, P. (2003) *The Argento Effect*, in Jancovich, M. (ed.) *Defining cult movies: the cultural politics of oppositional taste*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Koven, M. J. (2006) *La Dolce Morte: Vernacular Cinema and the Italian Giallo Film*, Oxford: Scarecrow.

show. Coupled with the high DVD sales of the show and the fan support, Fox decided to commission a fourth season, much to the delight of fans. In this case, it would appear that the internet can serve as an equaliser of sorts, although repeated examples of a failure to influence producers on behalf of fans tends to confirm the rule.

By and large, therefore, fan production in extending the textual meanings of shows like *Star Trek*, or in circulating concert bootlegs of rock bands, out-takes and so on, can be seen to fulfil a desire for more product and meaning. Interestingly, and despite the relative niche aspects of fan cultures, such groups are increasingly pandered to by

Doing media studies

Investigating fandom

Identify a 'fan' website: this could be devoted to a pop band, film, TV show, person, etc. What is the 'fan object' and what kinds of things are said and done around it? What kinds of values are in evidence in this activity? Is there any sense of a hierarchy of fandom here? What relationship does your example of fandom have with media producers?

producers. The generation and regurgitation of DVD box sets, reissues, repackaging and so on of back-catalogue items, as well as the 'limited' edition for new releases across media forms, is an obvious means of exploiting and recuperating fan activity.

We've noted in passing that fandom has benefited from digitisation and the invention of the internet. This provides a rich resource for researchers interested in this aspect of audience activity. Jenkins (1992; Tulloch and Jenkins, 1995) notes how fans were early adopters of new media forms to aid their activities, providing an 'ethnographic' study of a newsgroup centred on the early-1990s US TV series *Twin Peaks*. Clearly influenced by Jenkins' study, Matt Hills briefly studies an online *X-Files* newsgroup to provide an 'ethnography of the cult audience' participating in online discussion (Hills, 2002: 174). Clerc (1996) discusses the growing online participation of female fans in newsgroups amidst male dominance and Baym (1999) also looks at gendered audiences by considering the merging of audience studies and computer communication. She uses an ethnographic study of an online soap opera fan community to understand how women construct their individual identity and participate in a community. All of these developments, and the kinds of activities exemplified by fans, are important to understanding wider 'audience' or 'user' activity online and, indeed, how this is changing our conceptualisation of media consumers and their relationship with producers.

Online audience activity: creating communities, meaning and identity

In this section, we will explore ways of making sense of online activities in relation to the creation of virtual communities and social networks. The importance of this concept can be illustrated through the example of Facebook, one of the most popular websites on the web.

Current statistics claim that it has over 80 million active members and is the sixth most visited site in the world; second in terms of social networking websites. Demographically, the fastest growing group of users is those who are 25 years of age and above (www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics). With claims such as these, it is hard to ignore the issues presented to attentive media audience researchers by sites such as Facebook, alongside others like MySpace and BeBo. High user numbers suggest that here is a phenomenon worthy of our attention, but what is particularly interesting about sites such as these is the way in which audiences present themselves and interact with one another. In this case, the audience is truly and visibly active. Not only are people communicating with each other in a variety of different ways but they are also 'producing' meanings through their interactions and contributions. In addition to having profiles on social networking websites, people may also have blogs (weblogs) that they carefully maintain as a repository for their thoughts, opinions and so on. Some online users might upload video, or even create vodcasts or podcasts. Photos are uploaded to sites such as Flickr and are shared and commented upon by other users – some may be familiar to those who post such material, others may be strangers.

We can speculate that the nature of audience behaviour is changing or that these online sites and the opportunities afforded users present new ways of being media consumers, even as they integrate familiar and more long-standing modes of media consumption. It is important, therefore, that we are aware of the ways in which people are using new media and what ideas this presents for thinking about 'audiences' and potential research projects.

What is a virtual community?

The term virtual community was coined by the theorist Howard Rheingold, who defined it as: 'A group of people who may or may not meet one-another face-to-face, and who exchange words and ideas through the mediation of computer bulletin boards and networks. In cyberspace . . . we do everything people do when people get together, but we do it with words on computer screens, leaving our bodies behind' (Rheingold, 1993). Guimaraes Jr. suggests that a variety of activities can take place between people with mutual interests in online communities, and users obtain different gratifications when they participate in them (Guimaraes and Lopes, 2005:141–56). Nessim Watson adds that this type of environment 'depends not only upon communication and shared interests but also upon communion' (Watson, 1997: 104). Baym suggests that, although many attributes of face-to-face communication are not available in cyberspace, this has not disrupted our communication skills. She indicates that this

is because new forms of expression (e.g. emoticons), which can also be very creative, have evolved on the internet and in online communities (Baym, 1995/96: 151–53). So, online communities, like subcultural groups and fandom, may generate their own conventions, languages and values that make them distinctive.

In order to understand the nature of virtual community, it is worth outlining the role that the internet has had in this development, as well as its difference from the web. The internet is a global network of computers, whilst the web is a user-friendly interface that runs on the internet. The World Wide Web (the web) was invented by Tim Berners-Lee between 1990 and 1991 (see www.w3.org/People/Berners-Lee/). He sought to find a way in which people could use the internet with the goal of creating a space where people could communicate by sharing information. It is this ethos of sharing that has allowed the internet to grow to such a spectacular degree, as it allows audiences actively to produce material and meaning, and to interact with each other and established professional media producers to a degree unimaginable in the recent past. Collaboration was vital in order for the web to grow. Without anyone producing websites, it would not be as densely populated as it is right now, nor would it have encouraged the establishment of virtual communities. We've mentioned already social networking sites such as Facebook and Bebo, while some further examples of where virtual communities can be found include:

- Bulletin board systems (also known as discussion forums): forums are usually part of a website, offering a place for the online user or 'surfer' to discuss subjects related to the content of that site. The forum system usually requires membership in order for the user to post a topic or view the forums.
- Newsgroups: similar in many respects to discussion forums, newsgroups were one of the earliest forms of virtual communities on the internet. Newsgroups are still very much in existence and can be accessed via client software: Microsoft's Outlook Express, for example. They are sometimes used to distribute films, music, games and software illegally.
- Blogs: though not generally accepted as virtual communities, blogs offer users the ability to communicate with the blog author and engage in discussion based around specific issues.
- Chat rooms: 'real-time' environments, where users can talk amongst a large group of people.
- Massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs): popular games such as *World of Warcraft* (www.worldofwarcraft.com) and even the online virtual world *Second Life* (<http://secondlife.com/>) can

be classified as MMORPGs. As suggested by the name, these sites have a very large membership, who interact in a virtual world.

In Rheingold's optimistic view of the internet, online communities open up a new site for the public sphere (p. 00), where free interaction can take place and people from different global locations are able to engage in discussion and exchange. Rheingold has also shown an awareness of how the relative anonymity afforded by online activity can have both a positive and negative effect. Those who might feel unable to voice their opinions in society may find the anonymity to be useful in allowing them to contribute to discussion. Conversely, those who are perfectly reasonable and non-confrontational in real life can become unnecessarily aggressive online, using the cloak of anonymity to act in this way (see, for example www.penny-arcade.com/docs/internetdickwad.jpg).

James Slevin suggests that, while 'all media requires skills' (Slevin, 2000: 65), internet use demands the need for particular capabilities, resources and attentiveness (66). This suggests that being online is not just about having the skills to work a computer but that it is also important to learn and employ the languages and tactics that have been adapted online, like emoticons and abbreviations in virtual communities. Such usage may mark out online users in communities as insiders and outsiders (Jordan, 1999: 70). This sense of the different status levels online is useful for exploring some of the categorisations of internet user activity.

Ananda Mitra carried out a study on the *soc.culture.indian* community group, in which he examined its postings. He discovered that, although many members of the community actively participated by responding to messages, the majority of users were reading but not making a response. These people are identified as 'lurkers' (Mitra, 1997: 62). Willson agrees that only a small amount of people actually participate, as 'many operate from a voyeuristic or viewer position' (Willson, 1997: 153). Nessim Watson indicates, in his work on *Phish.net*, that these lurkers reflect the lack of commitment that can occur in the online world in comparison to societies in 'real' life (Watson, 1997: 105). He believes that this is because 'Within a virtual community individuals are able to choose their degree of interaction' (Willson, 1997: 152). Jones agrees that this type of participant is negative to communities, as this sort of activity online surely creates an isolated form of being; if you are lurking, you are not interacting and are therefore no more social than a wallflower (Jones, 1997: 13).

In order for online communities to be successful as communities in terms of sociability, they draw on codes of conduct and ethics which may be derived from 'real life'

interaction. They have their own set of rules in order to function correctly. This is where the term ‘netiquette’ comes from. Netiquette refers to online etiquette, generally accepted rules and ways of communicating in virtual spaces. A simple example of netiquette would be not writing in block capitals, as this is regarded as shouting. Further examples of netiquette include: not using someone else’s name and pretending to be them; not using abusive or threatening language; not posting negative remarks regarding peoples sex, race or gender; not ‘spamming’ message boards or chat rooms with useless or repeated messages (see www.internet-guide.co.uk/netiquette-guide.html).

Even though virtual communities have such rules, they can be liberating, empowering and democratic for the inhabitants, when compared to the real or corporeal world. If optimistic academics such as Rheingold are to be believed, virtual communities present a utopian ideal that offers a solution to many issues in the ‘corporeal’ or bodily world. However, virtual communities are not exempt from prejudice and are not without their own problems. Steve Jones (1995) sounds a note of caution, seeing cyberspace as a cultural construction that is not a value-free environment. Its use reflects the structure of values and beliefs that circulate or hold together ‘real’ society, and is capable of reinforcing existing power relations and inequalities in the same way as any other institutional form. After all, if you have someone who is prejudiced in real life, they are still likely, if not more so, to be prejudiced in an online environment.

We should also be aware that virtual communities are usually actively moderated, so as to prevent spamming and the posting of unwanted topics or comments. The moderator therefore takes the role of ‘gatekeeper’, deciding what is and is not acceptable (p. 00). This decision making is subject to the moderator’s own personal values and beliefs. An example of this can found at the Mobius Home Video Forum (www.mhvf.net). Mobius had a reputation for being heavily moderated. When the films of US documentarist Michael Moore were being discussed, a number of posts were deleted as they did not accord with the moderator’s political stance.

We should also be aware that not everyone is able to have internet access. This is where the digital divide can become an issue. The digital divide can be understood as ‘Different access and use of the internet according to gender, income, race and location’ (Couldry, 2004: 190). So, for example, some parts of the world may not have internet access, and people in some countries may not be able to afford internet access. This means that some people are excluded from being able to be part of such communities. Even though virtual communities might present us with a utopian ideal, they still recreate society and bring with them unwanted baggage.

As we established earlier, a characteristic of the web is the sharing and contributing of knowledge. The general consensus of online discussion forums, for instance, is to provide support and help to others and to further one’s knowledge in the particular subject area catered for. Posters are asked to ‘stay on topic’ in forums, for example; in a computer support forum devoted to processors, if someone posted a comment about a TV soap opera they would be warned for being off topic and possibly banned for not following forum rules. Wellman and Guila (1999) see online communities as electronic support groups, offering help and support to people who require specific information. They suggest that ‘helping others can increase self esteem, respect from others, and status attainment’ (Wellman and Guila, 1999: 176).

The issue of ‘status’ is of particular interest here, as some posters and active members in virtual communities are not primarily there to help others but to enhance their reputation amongst online peers. This is when we might see hierarchies appearing in virtual communities, where at the top is the moderator/forum owner and below are those who have the higher number of contributions to the forum. But, just because a user has a large number of contributions, it does not mean that they are an authority on a particular issue – they just might not have anything better to do. Bourdieu’s notion of cultural capital is useful here, as those who contribute to forums, such as fans, might want to demonstrate their power and knowledge through answering and responding to questions (Bourdieu and Passeron, 2002). Because of this competitive environment, newcomers to online environments might perceive them to be uncomfortable places, as they may find it difficult to fit in.



Online games such as *Second Life* offer an ability to participate in communities in virtual fashion.

Identity and deception

One way in which we come to terms with and address a community is to present ourselves in a particular way. Sociologist Erving Goffman's (1959) studies of 'real-life' interaction suggested that we role-play and present public personas, which we deem to be appropriate for certain types of social intercourse. Do we behave the same way online? There are many extreme examples of people using the anonymity of the internet to create a fictional 'narrative' of themselves and presenting that to other users. Even

if we do not consciously do this, some studies suggest that we actively construct identities for ourselves when online which may be extensions or alternatives to those we inhabit in a regular 'physical' interactions.

Sherry Turkle's (Turkle, 1995) study *Life on Screen* looks at the construction of online identities in virtual environments. She found that cyberspace provides people with the opportunity to express themselves more freely and allows them to discover an 'authentic', more fulfilling sense of self-identity, with many users, more often than

Case study

eBay



Individuals and collectives generate and manage some online communities from their own independent action. Other communities are allied to commercial operations – in relation to media and other activities and products. There are interesting dynamics to be explored and understood in such sites, therefore, as users/audiences enter into dialogue with each other under the gaze and management of companies, who provide their pleasures and support their activity. In this regard, a curious and unusual site for attention is that of eBay.

eBay Inc is an internet company that manages the online marketplace ebay.com. The brand was founded, in 1995, by Pierre Omidyar, who wanted to provide an online platform that would allow for the selling of products and services by a community of individuals and small businesses. eBay is promoted as an online space where people can connect through what they call 'social commerce', which is defined as 'a powerful combination of commerce, communication and community that enhances traditional buying and selling' (eBay, 2008). This is achieved within an auction environment, where members sell and bid for items; 'buy it now' prices can also be set, which allow users to purchase goods immediately.

eBay is the type of online platform that requires specific skills and capabilities (Slevin, 2000: 66). Users need knowledge of the conventions

and tactics required to be a successful seller. These are related to the formal conventions set up by the site's owners but also the 'cultural' conventions that have been established by users themselves. The virtual community of eBay has established its own conventions about acceptable behaviour and, particularly, about the establishment of trustworthy, peer-reviewed identities. As the site is dedicated to financial transactions, trust and reputable identities for both buyers and sellers are essential. Newman and Clarke have discovered that online auctions account for a great amount of online fraud (Newman and Clarke, 2003: 93). The opportunities they describe include bid shilling, where the seller or the seller's friend takes on a false identity and attempts to bid on their own item to make the bidding price increase. Another is bid shielding, where a buyer and partner make a really high bid to scare away other bidders then, at the last moment, the bid is withdrawn and the associate wins at a low price. Then there is non-delivery, where the seller receives the payment and does not ship the item or delivers a cheaper product. Finally, they discuss non-payment, where bidders do not make a payment (Newman and Clarke, 2003: 96).

Interestingly, while the pursuit of financial reward is possibly the primary pleasure of eBay, many secondary pleasures also occur from discussion board participation, which sometimes relate to the nature of buying and selling, other times to completely unrelated topics, such as favoured TV shows, politics, food addictions and so on. Herein, one can observe the characteristics of virtual communities identified by Rheingold, such as instances of users finding pleasure and satisfaction in the formation of friendships and the giving and receiving of support (Rheingold, 1991: 57–80).

not, inhabiting multiple identities online. For example, when online, some people might present themselves as being of a different gender, race, physical ability, sexuality or even appearance, and hence act through different languages and discourses to construct different 'online' experiences, through different interactions in various communities or online one-to-one relationships.

Charles Cheung suggests that the Internet 'provides a range of ways in which net users can carefully select, polish and embellish aspects of their selves to present to their friends, families and unacquainted Web surfers, without risking the embarrassment or harassment that may be experienced in face-to-face interaction' (Cheung, 2004: 50). So, the internet can provide a hiding place – a disguise, enabling us to invent a persona and interact under different rules from those by which we are defined 'in person'. This issue has been at the forefront of the online paedophilia moral panic (Waterson, 2000) and also the current online privacy and fraud debate, where we are told to be aware that the people with whom we interact online may not be who they say they are.

Though people create identities, it doesn't always mean that they are reputable sources of information. This is discussed by Judith Donath (1998) in her valuable work on identity and deception in online communities. She suggests that 'deception to the information seeking reader is potentially high' – users can create any identity they wish, claiming to be experts or changing their gender – and that the only way to enhance one's reputation in an online community is by posting interesting topics or providing support to fellow users (Donath, 1998: 31). She also highlights other forms of identity deception, such as 'trolling', where rogue posters attempt to disrupt the community by giving 'bad advice' and 'flaming', which is when users are insulted (Donath, 1998: 44). Donath reminds us that people online may not always be reliable, something that is important when studying virtual communities.

New virtual spaces, new audiences

In recent years, new media forms have allowed the development of a much more interactive aspect to online communication (and indeed across other media). The term Web 2.0 is sometimes enlisted to identify this change, marking out the fact that we seem to have moved on from an earlier, more primitive stage of electronic activity. Whilst the term is relatively meaningless in itself, the shift it refers to is marked by the advent of blogs, wikis, social networking sites and other new forms of online communities, such as YouTube. With these sites, the emphasis is placed on collaboration and networking rather than simply visiting to consume set content in a manner analogous to the one-way nature of old media. The popularity

of sites such as Facebook, MySpace and YouTube demonstrates that audiences are no longer just using the internet primarily as a source of information but are actively involved in production, and in changing the way in which media is both created and consumed. One only has to look at the way in which the first incarnation of Napster, the infamous file-sharing software, changed the ways that music was distributed and consumed to see that the boundaries between producers and audiences are being blurred.

Another instance of this blurring can be found in citizen journalism. Bowman and Willis (2003) define citizen journalism as the act of citizens 'playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analysing and disseminating information'. On many recent occasions, such as the Chinese Earthquake of 2008, early news of the tragedy was broken on the social networking site Twitter, and further details were published on blogs and distributed on networking sites. An early example of citizen journalism was demonstrated in the 7 July 2005 London bombings, where members of the public, some who were actually trapped in the London Underground, were taking pictures and video of the event as it unfolded. Some of the images were broadcast by major news channels and used in newspapers. Citizen journalists are also able to raise issues that are ignored or not accurately reported by the mass media, and cover them, without any regulatory presence, on their blogs. The two-way nature of the blog allows for readers to engage in discussion and also add to the news story, sharing details and their own accounts. Here we can see the collection, distribution and consumption of news changing, and the mass media having to change in order to accommodate this new form of news reporting.

Doing media studies

Investigating virtual communities

Identify a virtual community and have a look at some of the discussions present. You may have to join the forum in order to look at the discussion. Consider the following questions:

- How do members of this community construct/present their identities?
- What is the relationship between the members of this community?
- What strategies are used to reinforce and maintain the relationship?
- Are there any values or activities that seem to be unique to this particular community?

Researching media audiences

Methodologies

Now that we have explored some ideas about audiences and their activities, how are we to find out meaningful things about them ourselves, about what they do with media products, why they do the things they do, what meanings media forms have for them and the role that media play in their lives? This section is dedicated to outlining briefly some of the methods which researchers have deployed in pursuing these questions. The term ‘method’, short for methodology, is simply a way of labelling the organised technique and process by which we go about these investigations. We have encountered a number of other methods so far in this book that have been concerned with analysing the text: rhetoric, genre, semiology, narratology and content analysis (p. 00).

As we suggested in the last chapter, in discussing being part of an audience (p. 00), the concept seems rather obvious and close at hand as we are, all of us, at some time or another, members of an audience, readership or online community. This might suggest that researching media consumption is an entirely obvious procedure. Of course, media companies ask questions of audiences and survey their behaviour all the time, in pursuit of what we’ve called ‘instrumental’ knowledge that can be used for the purpose of enhancing what they do in order to keep the same customers satisfied. However, the kinds of questions and issues we seek to explore with audiences are particular and often peculiar to media studies. While people think about and speak with each other about their media consumption all the time, some questions we might wish to ask might seem very odd indeed. It would be very unusual to be confronted by someone asking you to talk about the way in which your reading of your daily newspaper allows you to function as a citizen in relation to ideas of the public sphere, or if you asked a group of five-year-old children about representations in Disney films and how they understood gender depictions in *The Little Mermaid*. The kinds of subjects that we are interested in are not necessarily obviously manifest in what people say or do, nor can they always be accessed so directly.

It is not, therefore, that media audiences are difficult to identify, nor especially difficult to ‘get at’, although some can be for legal and moral reasons (try getting into a school to ask about Disney films, for instance). These legal and moral issues may present concerns for us as researchers just as much as for the audience we investigate and may dictate whether or not they are likely to be interested in being investigated. Think of the difficulties involved in researching the reality of online paedophiles, or Chinese web-users looking for sites relating to democratic material

or current affairs reporting on Chinese government repression in Tibet. Such extreme examples draw attention to the nature of how and why we embark upon research, as well as the ethical dimensions of how we proceed – issues dealt with below.

The methods explored in this section constitute a range of available tools; each one allows the researcher to do different things. How we employ one or more of these methods relates to the kinds of questions we ask of media forms, and their consumption and use. Whether or not the kinds of research we do yields results will relate to the ‘fit’ between question and method. It will also relate to the nature of the relationship as researchers that we have with our ‘subjects’, i.e. those very audience members who consume and use media. The particularities of the issues that concern us as media researchers, our concepts and explanatory jargon, may seem weighty, sophisticated and formidable. However, this array should not lead us to assume a position of superiority in the relationship we take up with the subject of research, as if our questions and observations are tools that will elicit a truth about those subjects and what they do with media forms that only we can arrive at. As we have said before, all of us already know what the media means and, indeed, what we do and why we do it. In our guise as media researchers, we may simply have different perspectives on why these things matter, what matters and in which contexts. Likewise, despite the apparent innocuousness of much media – products are more often than not fun, frivolous, ephemeral – these mean a lot to audiences, and the way that they mean within the audiences’ lives means that we must consider them with care, attention and respect.

Such considerations will condition how we go about any research, its tone and, indeed, what we make of the data we produce. And it is data that research into audiences produces. While we might ‘know’ what media means and why we consume various products as audience members, trying to articulate these meanings, placing them in meaningful explanatory contexts, and understanding and articulating them, is a job of reflection and interpretation. Researching audiences can be very time-consuming and laborious, but also rewarding. Sometimes, what one ‘discovers’ or elaborates on as a result of research and interpretation can be quite spectacular or even banal: both might be significant.

These methods will only become meaningful if you employ them but, in order to put them to work, you need some understanding of what they are as well as what kinds of questions about audiences they will allow you to address and answer. Using these methods effectively will depend upon the kinds of research questions you ask and how well informed you are about how others have employed them. Each time you read research work from the field of media studies – whether concerning audiences or not – do reflect

upon what the writer has to say about the method they have employed.

Questionnaires and interviews

Questionnaires or surveys are a common audience research method and the format informs the organisation of interviews. Potentially, surveys allow the researcher to reach a much larger 'sample' or number of people (or respondents) than any of the other audience research methods presented here. This is based upon designing a set of questions and circulating them to 'respondents' for them to answer and return in their own time. However, what one makes up for in quantity tends to be lost in quality, as questionnaires are quite blunt tools. Thus, this method is best used to present a list of unequivocal questions that, usually, can be answered quickly and concisely by respondents. Multiple choice options or rating systems (e.g. 'On a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 is poor and 10 is excellent, give a rating for Britney Spears' latest video') are often employed in questionnaires, which might be presented by the researcher to subjects, posted or uploaded online. For example:

Q. Which regional newspaper/s do you read?

| | Always | Often | Occasionally | Never |
|-------------------------|--------|-------|--------------|-------|
| Birmingham Evening Mail | 1 | 2 | 3 | 0 |
| Express and Star | 1 | 2 | 3 | 0 |
| Birmingham Post | 1 | 2 | 3 | 0 |

Bertrand and Hughes (2004) identify four appropriate uses of questionnaires in media audience research: demographic surveys (age, ethnicity, gender and so on – details that most of us supply to census takers); ratings surveys (who watched what); attitude and opinion surveys; and surveys of behaviour (who does what, goes where and so on).

In order to draw meaningful conclusions from responses to questionnaire content, a large sample needs to have been drawn that is statistically significant in relation to an object of research. 'Significance' will of course be dependent upon circumstances. For example, consider local cinemagoers – say at a 10-screen, out-of-town multiplex with an average of 2000 visitors per night. Even if we wanted to make sense of, say, the reasons for visiting for any one night's sample of visitors, we would probably need responses from 10 per cent (200) of this figure to begin to draw conclusions or to claim that any insights were significant, rather than idiosyncrasies.

If used effectively, questionnaires can be a useful research method. Questions need to be carefully worded so as not to avoid confusion for both interviewer and

respondent. 'Closed' questions tend to be more useful, as they limit possible responses and are more manageable for analysis. A closed question invites a yes or no answer or a simple identification (e.g. what newspaper/s do you read?). Open-ended questions can be successful, although they invite reflection and elaboration (e.g. what do you like about 'x' newspaper?). Data resulting from such questions would be variable and hard to collate. If you use this method, the length of the questionnaire should be kept as short possible, so that you are able to garner as many responses as possible in good time. A useful way of proceeding is to 'pilot' a version of your questionnaire in order to evaluate its usability with respondents and to allow fine-tuning of your questions.

Ultimately, questionnaires deliver data that, if you've produced the 'quantities' associated with this method, offer statistical insights that you will then be able to generalise from. To what extent you are able to go beyond the kinds of things done in market research, however, will, of course, depend upon the kinds of question you have posed.

One further thing that questionnaires can do is to introduce researchers to individuals who are willing to spend time in more detailed interviews, participate in focus groups or allow researchers to observe them in the process of consuming their preferred media and the context in which they do so.

Interviews take advantage of the fact that people can tell you things about themselves. They are an invaluable method for exploring the feelings and reactions that audience members or fans have for their preferred pleasures, for obtaining oral histories and as a way of interrogating media workers about their roles. Interviews can be, at one extreme, unstructured and free-ranging in response to the circumstances of the interaction of interviewer and interviewee, or at the other, based on a fixed sequence of largely 'closed' questions. Fully structured interviews are often used for market research, interviewing and other survey work. The respondent is asked a set of pre-planned questions and their answers are coded into tightly defined categories, in similar fashion to questionnaires. Semi-structured interviews are generally the most useful form of interviewing. For the purpose of a semi-structured interview, you are generally trying to get yes/no type answers, but you are likely to provide the opportunity for your respondent to expand on their answer. For example, you might ask the following initial question in an interview concerning audiences for radio news:

Q. Was there any topic not covered in the news bulletin that you think should have been included?

A. (Respondent answers with a yes or no.) If the respondent answered yes you would ask them what it was that they thought should have been included.

Case study

Using questionnaires



Lyn Thomas, in her book *Fans, Feminism and 'Quality' Media* (2002), used questionnaires in order to access fans of the UK radio show

The Archers and TV detective show *Inspector Morse*. This method was used to identify individuals who would be willing to speak in depth about their pleasures and the kinds of issues dealt with in these texts that she was interested in exploring – debates around gender, feminism, nationality, tradition, etc. None of these subjects are likely to be the kind of thing one can access in any nuanced manner through questionnaires.

Thomas distributed questionnaires about *Morse* at a screening of an episode at the National Film Theatre and at other events dedicated to her texts. This meant that she was able to identify 'dedicated' consumers, willing to go out of their way, beyond their typical consumption, and, potentially, more likely to offer responses. Thus, she writes of one instance at an Arts Festival 'performance' of *The Archers* radio show that, for an audience of 900 people 'I gave out 300 forms, and 158 people returned completed forms at the end . . . the high response rate (just over 50 per cent) is also indicative of the strength of fan cultures around the programme and of its popularity. In the weeks following I sent out questionnaires to my sample of 158. Some 110 were returned . . . indicative of regular listeners' commitment to the programme, but it is also perhaps linked to the class profile of the sample' (Thomas, 2002: 63). The fact that these media consumers were largely middle class, middle aged and white perhaps disposed them towards responding dutifully, as did their attachment to the texts under scrutiny and the potentially enjoyable pay-off of indulging the knowledge and attachment to the shows that they had as dedicated fans.

Obviously the opposite of structured interviews, unstructured interviews allow for an open discussion that can be guided towards appropriate areas. Rather than having a series of prepared questions, the researcher may

have identified a number of themes or issues they wish to cover in the session beforehand.

When identifying who to talk to, it is important to establish whether your subject is an *actor* or an *informant*. Actors are involved in the activity you are investigating, informants are not directly involved, but have information that may be of use to you. When interviewing for factual information, you should bear in mind that it may well be influenced by the values, attitudes and beliefs of the person you are interviewing.

Interviews can take place in a variety of locations. Ideally they should take place in person, but on occasions you may need to interview your subject by telephone or even virtually, using email, instant messaging software or chat rooms. Interviews should be relaxed, fairly informal encounters. It is advisable to record interviews, as it is not possible to transcribe interviews on the fly. Recorded interviews can be played back repeatedly, revealing different issues or points that you may have missed during the moment. Make sure you ask permission to use a recorder, and stress confidentiality if your respondent is concerned. Note taking can be a distraction and prevent you from concentrating on what the person is saying. However, an occasional bit of note taking tells the respondent you are interested in what they are saying. When asking questions, put the other person at their ease (even if you are the nervous one). Let them know how you want the interview to proceed: why are you seeing them? What type of questions will you be asking? How much time will the interview take up (is this OK with them)? Start with straight forward, non-threatening, fairly factual questions, but stay away from questions that will produce simple yes or no answers – you want to get them talking. Try to get them to talk about concrete examples where they can comment about something specific. Keep your questions short and deliver them in easily understandable language. Try to ensure that your questions have a logical order. If you want to ask them anything controversial, save this for nearer the end of the interview, when it won't matter so much if they dry-up or refuse to answer any more of your questions.

Listening is a difficult skill for most interviewers. It is easy to miss what someone is saying by thinking about the next question you are going to ask. Concentrate on what they are saying and don't worry if there is a pause before you can come up with the next question. Let the person know that you are listening to what they are saying, preferably by using non-verbal communication such as the occasional head nod. Don't summarise what they have just said or finish their sentences for them. These interventions can be very irritating for your respondent.

You may be asking people to describe and to reflect on activities that they take for granted and engage in habitually as part of their daily routine. Give them a little time to

think about the question you have just asked them. Don't interrupt during this thinking time and don't interrupt when they are speaking. When they have finished what they are saying you can explore the issue further. Use 'how', 'in what way', 'why' type questions or an expectant silence to explore issues in more detail.

There is considerable debate about whether an interviewer should empathise, agree or disagree during an interview. Some people may wish to know your opinions – others may not. Some may give you a more useful reply if they know you have a good knowledge of the subject – others may explain an issue more thoroughly if they think you are slightly naïve (but not clueless!). It's probably best not to disagree too strongly or challenge someone directly, unless they are being gratuitously offensive. However, in such cases it's probably a good idea to bring the interview to a swift conclusion.

Not all interviews are a success but, by good preparation, suitable questions and a relaxed and respectful approach, you can improve your chances of getting good material. Always remember that your interviewee has volunteered their time to assist you.

Focus groups

Focus groups are interviews in a group setting where the researcher is able to question several people in relation to a research topic. This method allows the generation of conversation between group members around the topic, often in response to a specific 'stimulus' set before them, such as a media text. Thus, if research concerned media moral panics, specific extracts from the tabloid press might be used as a point of discussion, or a music video might be played in a discussion of representation in such forms.

In studying audiences, it would be necessary to gather relevant respondents. Thus, if you were looking at teenage female responses to a fashion magazine, you would need to ensure that your focus group consists of teenage females. Alternatively, if you were attempting to discover the meanings an audience associates with a specific radio station or show, you would need to make sure that your focus group includes a cross-section of that audience, such as different ages, races and genders, otherwise it would not have much value.

Focus groups should have between six and eight participants, any more and it can be difficult to moderate, any fewer and it might be difficult to generate conversation. The role of the moderator in a focus group is crucial. If a focus group goes well, the moderator will have very little to do. A good moderator will have little involvement with the conversation, only being on hand to get the conversation

started and also to keep to conversation focused on the topic. On occasion, there might be a dominant member of the group or some members may not be speaking. It is the job of the moderator to monitor the group dynamic and to try and get everyone to speak. If the moderator has too great an involvement with the group, it can impede upon the quality of the overall results. Focus groups are usually recorded, either using an audio or video recorder, as it is very difficult to make full notes during the session. Video recordings can be particularly useful, as you are able to study body language and group interactions.

Ethnography

Ethnography is a method of fieldwork research derived from anthropology. This method is one where the researcher attempts to enter into the 'culture' or way of life (p. 00) of a particular group and provide an account of its meanings and activities from inside, based on what they mean to members of that culture. However, in ethnographic accounts there is always a further concern: what interpretation does the ethnographer *make* of group activities and meanings. This concern is particularly important because it defines ethnography as an *interpretive* activity.

Ethnographic insights are gained by observing how people interact with each other, but also by interviewing people about their own and their fellow group members' cultural practices. As a result, ethnographic writing within anthropology usually contains elements such as lengthy verbatim quotes, biographies and case studies. Raw ethnographic data is predominantly qualitative. Without interpretation, this material tells us little beyond what can be gleaned from the descriptions of the researcher and the self-descriptions of those interviewed. Thus, ethnographers must always be aware of their own subjectivity: the way that they stand in relation to those that they study. Ethnographers might be of a different class and cultural affiliation from the people that they write about, so the interpretations they make of social and cultural practices will necessarily be grounded in their own life experience. Ethnography forces us to confront our roles as researchers of other people's lives and behaviour. This applies as equally to ethnographies of media consumers or participants as it does to traditional anthropological ethnography.

The anthropologist Clifford Geertz, who has written interestingly and readably about this area, has warned potential ethnographers that they must be aware of the constructedness of the accounts that they produce: 'What we call our data are really our own constructions of other people's constructions of what they and their counterparts are up to' (Geertz, quoted in Moores, 1993: 62). So, we should be aware that, when we talk to someone about their

TV viewing, for instance, they are constructing a particular account of their viewing practices, from which we further construct our own interpretation. A handy set of questions to bear in mind when considering ethnographic accounts is: who is writing, about whom, from what relative position, and in what material circumstances? This provides a neat way of assessing the nature of your own ethnographic accounts and those of others. Are you, or they, claiming to be a neutral observer or an interested party?

Whilst ethnography has been used for researching fan cultures, online communities and subcultures, an area that has been most productive in its use of ethnographic methods has been that of TV viewing. Implicit in the range

of academic studies has been the idea that TV viewing is a part of everyday life and not an isolated, anti-social activity – as it has often been viewed in the past. For ethnographers of the TV audience, viewing is interwoven with other cultural and social practices, and so cannot be studied outside of its ‘natural’ context, which is the domestic setting in most cases. As Roger Silverstone has commented:

Television is everyday life. To study one is at the same time to study the other. There are TV sets in almost every household in the Western world . . . their texts and their images, their stories and their stars provide much of the

Case study

Ethnography in practice? The Oregon Soap Opera Study



Four media researchers wanted to investigate why and how people watched soap operas (Seiter *et al.*, 1991). They got hold of their informants by advertising in the local paper, offering potential interviewees \$5 per hour to take part in the study. They had numerous calls, but whittled these down to 26 informants – all of whom had promised to get hold of between two and nine other interviewees to take part in the study as well. Altogether, they got 64 participants for the study. The interviews took place in the homes of those informants who had responded to the newspaper advertisement. The researchers thought that these were sufficiently ‘natural’ settings for their study, although they accepted that such practices would not meet the standards of traditional ethnography. They argue that none of the research into TV audiences meets these standards, because the periods of contact are necessarily brief when compared to the kinds of fieldwork anthropologists do.

During the account of their study, the research team regularly use quotes from viewers to

support their assertions. For instance, on the subject of women viewing distractedly, the following woman (RG) is quoted: ‘I’ll clean, but I’ll have the TV on so I can hear it . . . if you can hear what’s going on . . . like, you know, if there is a good fight or something going on, I always run in here and watch what’s going on’ (Seiter *et al.*, 1991: 231). The study found that women who structured household tasks tended to build soap-watching into the day and not watch distractedly, whilst those women who thought of housework as ‘endless’ would usually do something else as they watched. Interestingly, they also found that soap viewers tended to fill in gaps caused by missing episodes or distracted viewing, by getting the information from discussions with friends. Those of us who are regular soap viewers would recognise the collective nature of soap, and how it tends to encourage these sort of discussions. The Oregon team also found that soap viewers are well aware of the constructed nature of soap, and often comment on the writing or acting in their favourite examples of the genre. This evidence counters disparaging views of audiences such as soap viewers being unable to tell fiction from reality. They clearly can, but prefer to suspend disbelief to enhance their enjoyment of the shows. Interestingly, the Oregon study found a huge gap between some textual accounts of the ‘passive’ female soap viewer and the views expressed by their informants. On the whole, women viewers tended not to identify with the ‘feminine’ female characters but, instead, the villains of the piece or the stronger women characters in general.

conversational currency of our lives. TV has been much studied. Yet it is precisely this integration into the daily lives of those who watch it which has somehow slipped through the net of academic enquiry'

(quoted in Morley, 1992: 197).

James Lull (1990) suggests that the TV audience ethnographer can find out all that they want to know about viewing practices in an observation period of between three and seven days. It has to be said that most TV audience ethnographers tend to spend far shorter periods than this with those that they are observing. Ien Ang (1985), in her study of Dallas viewers, did not come into physical contact with her informants *at all*. She compiled her account from letters sent to her by fans of the show. Thus, TV audience ethnographers often only have the most fleeting contact with those that they study, which suggests perhaps that ethnography is sometimes used as a catch-all term to describe any audience study with an interest in the interpretation of qualitative data.

Virtual ethnography, or cyberspace ethnography, extends the anthropological method to online activities and communities. The popularity of the internet and its ease of use have attracted much attention not only from the general public but also from academics. David Bell believes that the 'very existence of the Internet and its easy accessibility make it a very attractive "site" for fieldwork' (2001: 195). With the existence of message boards, blogs, chat rooms and social networking profiles, it is obvious to see why this is so. Christine Hine believes that virtual ethnography 'can be used to develop an enriched sense of the meanings of the technology and the cultures which enable it and are enabled by it' (2000: 8).

There is no routine way to carry out a virtual ethnography, just suggestions which can help the ethnographer achieve highly beneficial results. Whilst the ethnographer should have a high level of involvement in the online community they are researching, too much involvement can lead to a mistrust of the ethnographer, which would subsequently affect the behaviour of those participating. This point is also mentioned by Bell: 'we have to remember that participation in any social setting transforms it – even if we do declare our intentions, our presence impacts on the behaviour of those around us' (Bell, 2001: 199).

An example of the research methods used in a virtual ethnographic study is found in Bakardjieva and Smith (2001), which shows how people integrate the internet into their everyday lives. They take a number of people from different backgrounds to see how they use the internet. A number of these users participate in online communities due to problems in their lives or the need to communicate with family abroad. They discuss 'Merlin', a

58-year-old, unemployed mechanical engineer. He used the internet in order to 'gain access to a professional community of people that he needed but was denied in the real world' – the people belonging to this community were mechanical engineers (Bakardjieva and Smith, 2001: 73). This gives one reason for people joining online communities: we join them in order to be part of a group, in which we can share a discussion on a niche subject with other like-minded people. But there are also many other examples of the virtual ethnographic approach used in different contexts.

Ethics and audience research

Ethics refers to the moral principles that define and guide acceptable standards of behaviour. These affect us socially and in our specific role as researchers, whether we choose to acknowledge them or not. Ethical considerations guide our integrity as researchers in formulating research as well as its reception. For instance, we seek to establish from the outset of any project that our work is valid, justified and that we did what we said we were going to do, rather than simply making it up, in accordance with the academic expectations and standards of honesty and reliability. More specifically, ethical principles impact upon our relationship with our subjects of research – from media producers to the audiences in focus in this chapter. Thus, when employing the methods outlined here and seeking to investigate what real people do with media forms, ethical considerations should always be at the forefront of any researcher's mind.

The wider research community – from the classroom, to a course, department within a college or university, to the wider field or discipline, to academia 'in general' – is responsible for setting and overseeing standards. In turn, the individual researcher is responsible to this wide community. If ethical issues are not considered or ignored, the researcher could, at best, be open to criticism from peers and, in some severe cases, professional censure and even prosecution. One body responsible for giving guidance to the field of media studies in the UK is the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), which gives extensive guidance on the subject, as well as setting out the expectation that researchers address related issues in applying for funds. Here are some of the ESRC's precepts:

- *Research should be designed, reviewed and undertaken to ensure integrity and quality*
- *Research staff and subjects must be informed fully about the purpose, methods and intended possible*

uses of the research, what their participation in the research entails and what risks, if any, are involved

- The confidentiality of information supplied by research subjects and the anonymity of respondents must be respected
- Research participants must participate in a voluntary way, free from any coercion
- Harm to research participants must be avoided
- The independence of research must be clear, and any conflicts of interest or partiality must be explicit.

(Source: www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk/ESRCInfoCentre/about/CI/CP/Social_Sciences/issue60/research_ethics.aspx)

Clearly the concern is with the researcher as much as any respondent, and occasionally researchers can be deeply affected by their experiences. This is worth dwelling on for a moment. Given the familiarity and ‘everydayness’ of media presence and use, this may be one of those moments where new researchers seem sceptical about the nature of ‘risk’ and ethical considerations involved in researching television, or magazines or gaming, for instance, when compared to, say, investigations of social poverty, injustice and so on in social sciences. Media studies presents its own series of ethical issues for consideration and, in relation to audiences especially, we’ve already noted the importance of media texts and meanings in individual lives, as well as the need to treat respondents with respect. In audience studies, we often seek access to homes, personal lives, individual preferences, memories, pleasures, thoughts and so on. In pursuing what ‘we’ are interested in, ‘they’ might be bemused, confused and sometimes uninterested in responding to the things we ask about, or not forthcoming in any manner! Furthermore, and in any involvement with ‘real’ people, however banal the research, attachments may form, information comes out (not always related to the subject under investigation) and researcher and subject may find themselves at odds with each other in terms of values, personality, class and so on.

An example from some recent research illustrates these points. In a project funded by the ESRC, Bev Skeggs, Nancy Thumim and Helen Wood researched the viewing practices and interpretations of reality TV programmes of 40 women in the London area. They began with textual analysis of programmes, followed by interviews in which they sought to locate participants ‘sociologically’ in terms of their social, cultural and economic contexts, and lifestyles. They followed this with viewing sessions, watching TV programmes with the women and recording their responses while they viewed, ending with follow-up focus groups. Both instances here reveal something about the expectations of the respondents. The first quote below reveals something about the expectations of one group of

respondents who assumed that the researchers would occupy a similar ground to themselves:

Our middle-class participants also often assumed that the researchers would share with them the cultural attitude of derision towards ‘reality’ television, and indeed television per se, as a bad object . . . That is not to say that these women did not watch and express pleasure in ‘reality’ television, but when asked to discuss particular programmes they did so by displaying their skill in holding the form at a distance, as the following exchange with Ann (who in the initial phone contact claimed not to watch ‘reality’ television) illustrates:

Ann: *Oh yes, oh my goodness, yes I love Supernanny, I even bought the book.*

Bev: *Really, I’ll write this one down, book [laughs].*

Ann: *Oh goodness, I am watching ‘reality’ TV.*

Bev: *So you would purposefully watch Supernanny?*

(Skeggs et al., 2008: 9–10)

In another group, questions of identity emerged in terms of nation, race, class and gender and led to a moment of awkwardness in an interview:

An extreme example was the interview with Saj. Saj is a Pakistani woman who did not have enough English for the interview (we only discovered this on arrival at her home). But Saj is a fan of Supernanny (broadcast on Channel 4) and was keen to take part in the project and so the interview continued. The interview was uncomfortable for both parties because it became clear that Saj viewed the interviewer as a representative of the state, offering her bank statements as if to prove her legitimacy. She also desperately wanted to answer the questions ‘correctly’ in order to say the ‘right’ things about her daily life in Britain, and was determined to display a positive attitude to ‘reality’ television. It was as if Saj thought the interview was a citizenship test and that we wanted to hear that she thought Britain and British television was ‘good’.

(Skeggs et al., 2008: 11)

This last example, too, illustrates the regular need to anonymise the identities of respondents – on this occasion the worry evinced by the Asian woman may have related to a genuine problem about her legal status as a citizen. More often, researchers alter names and identities in order to protect the privacy of respondents.

It is not uncommon for such instances of confusion and unease to occur and it behoves the researcher to be

prepared for and attuned to such instances. As far as possible, we always need to plan for and take into account ethical considerations, and take care of ourselves, too! Our

own moral, political and social orientations can impact upon research and, indeed, what we make of the data we generate as a result.

Summary

In this chapter, we have explored some of the ways in which we might make sense of the activities and contexts in which audiences make meaning and respond to media. We began with a discussion of some anecdotal ways of thinking about media consumption and of the kinds of relationship we have with media texts. We suggested that sometimes we're very engaged, other times quite distant from those things we consume and their meanings. On the one hand, this presents problems for those models of research that privilege the media message and the receiver at the expense of contexts of consumption. Above all, however, we suggested that we need to explore how people actually consume media and media meanings for the simple fact that they play such an integral role in our lives.

We explored a range of approaches to discovering what audiences actually do with media. The first, which came out of the dissatisfactions of 'effects' research and constructions of audiences, explores the 'uses' and 'gratifications' that media consumers derive from consumption. This approach has its uses, but we pointed to some of its limits in understanding social contexts rather than individual choice and, indeed, the relationship of specific textual features with the interpretative acts of audiences. Using the theoretical model developed by Stuart Hall – of encoding/decoding – we explored ways of thinking about the contexts of consumption and the kinds of pressures that might impact upon the way that we understand media meanings. Hall's model formed the basis for work by David Morley, which we can see as an impetus for a whole range of work that has sought to explore what real people actually do with media. We argued that this impulse has been most productive in the thrust of feminist work, which has been instrumental in exploring the contextual nature of media consumption.

We explored some parallel ideas here in the frameworks of subcultural studies and theories, and those of fans and fan communities. As in feminist research, work done in these areas traces a shift to a respectful approach to audiences, one in which popular pleasures have been taken seriously. What we learned about audiences has value for the kinds of activities that are now taking place online. We explored, therefore, ideas of virtual community and the way in which individuals are

active online in creating cultures and identities. As we saw, the nature of digital media raises questions about the distinctions between the audience and producer now that we all of us, potentially, have access to produce and distribute meaning.

In the final section of this chapter, we explored a number of issues and methods relating to researching audiences. Our outline of methods was brief but here the utility of each (in tandem with suggested reading and our main bibliography) should begin to suggest ways of doing media studies in this area. The final words were on the nature of ethics – for the integrity of how we proceed and the way that we relate to audiences should be a guide for all that we do as scholars.

You should now evaluate what you know and are able to do as a result of this chapter. If you have followed this chapter through, engaged with the activities and thought about the issues covered, you should be able to do the following:

- Identify key concepts and theories associated with the idea of media audience activity. (Of course, these are only brief summaries of some broad thrusts in media studies. You will need to follow these up with further reading to get to grips with detail, as well as with the differences between studies of audiences for different media forms).
- Identify and engage with key issues and approaches to conceptualising audiences as active users and interpreters of media products and messages.
- Conduct initial research into the activity of media audiences, utilising one or more methods as appropriate. (We are, all of us, part of media audiences at various times, as are most of our acquaintances. Likewise, the proliferation of online activity means that, potentially, wider audiences and users are available to us as objects of research. The meaningfulness of your own research and the utility of the methods you employ will come from having a go, exploring and testing your own ideas in relation to those questions and topics that are important to you. In tandem with those other ideas and modes of analysis – of texts and media businesses – you should also now be able to link up ideas and ways of making sense of media-related activities, as part of a complex web of relationships).

Doing media studies

Investigating audiences

Choose one (or more) of the following questions about audiences and outline a brief plan of research, identifying which method or methods you would employ. Outline any ethical issues that might arise in conducting this research, as well as any logistical issues (excluding those of language and cost):

- What are the pleasures of ‘committing crimes’ when playing contemporary computer games for young middle-class men?
- What ideas about body, femininity and relationships do teenage girls derive from reading problem pages in adolescent magazines?

- ‘Who’ comprises the audience for Barcelona’s Sonar (www.sonar.es/portal/eng/home.cfm) and what does this tell us about the role of music festivals in a multicultural Europe?
- On what terms can ‘warez’ file-sharing groups be considered to be a subculture?
- What kinds of ideas and values of community form around internet pornography sites?
- What role do tabloid newspaper reports of immigration and asylum seekers play in the views of women readers?
- How do people watch football on TV?

Further reading

As we have suggested, there is a wealth of material from TV studies on audiences, as well as a growing literature on fandom. Most of the titles mentioned and summarised are worth exploring in detail, particularly in terms of how scholars have employed methods for understanding audience activity. Here are some further suggestions:

Barker, M. and Brooks, K. (1998) *Knowing audiences: Judge Dredd, its friends, fans and foes*, Luton: Luton University Press.

This book explores the way in which audiences relate to action films such as the Hollywood blockbuster *Judge Dredd* starring Sylvester Stallone. The research is placed in the wider context of audience studies as a whole in order to grapple with various traditions and assumptions and as such is a useful guide to the field. This research evaluates ‘effects’ claims but also the significance of ideas of audience activity. The research explores the relations between people’s prior orientations to the film, and their eventual responses to and judgements of it.

Morley, M. (1988) *Family television: cultural power and domestic leisure*, London: Routledge.

This study developed Morley’s initial explorations as detailed in this chapter. Morley interviewed 18 families in

order to answer question such as how are TV materials interpreted and used by different families? He concentrates on nuclear families in the East End of London and his findings reveal how television fits into the home a site of leisure for the husband and a sphere of work for women, even when they work outside the home. The kinds of answers he finds to his questions reveal the gendered nature of consumption and the ways in which his respondents related to ‘gendered’ texts.

Thornton, S. (1995) *Club cultures: music, media and subcultural capital*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

Thornton takes an ethnographic approach to the participants of what was then the emergent ‘rave’ culture, exploring the ways in which it had meaning for its members. At the heart of this are some interesting insights into the role of popular music in the culture and discourses of authenticity, underground and mainstream. Thornton’s role as a participant observer is also explored.

Electronic resources

Read about research ethics in art, design and media at www.biad.uce.ac.uk/research/rti/ethics/