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12 The Nature of the Audience

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Most of us have heard and used the terms mass media and mass communication all our lives. Only one pair of eyes watches the screen or reads the newspaper at a time—even when surrounded by other pairs of eyes and ears—but apparently the media are believed to involve processes of mass communication. Where did this concept of “mass” come from, and does it make any sense?

Ang begins Part III by taking us on a tour of the history and meaning of some terms we have used all our lives without examination. By way of introducing the study of media audiences, she asks us to consider the ways we think the media exercise power in society. For citizens of the information age, the question is vital: What does it mean for us to live as audience members of the mass media?

The idea of the “masses,” popular in social thought of the nineteenth century, was particularly influential during the first half of the twentieth century. During that time, new media such as movies and radio attracted millions of people, alarming many cultural observers and critics. Phrases such as mass society, mass culture, and mass audiences, created to describe the unprecedented numbers of participants

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in the new media, carried the idea that radio, movies, and television acted as hypodermic needles, injecting messages directly into the veins of a passive, mindless, mass audience. It was felt that all other social institutions between the growing media and the masses, such as community and religion, had collapsed.

The image of media audiences as passive, faceless people of low taste and intelligence, now ascribed largely to television's "couch potatoes," actually yields no understanding of media audiences themselves and is of only historical interest to contemporary analysts. In our affluent cultures, life without the media would be almost unthinkable anyway. In fact, given that 98% of American households now have at least one television set, we must all be "masses." Or, as the British cultural analyst Raymond Williams puts it, there are no masses, "only ways of seeing people as masses"—and those ways tend to be elitist and moralistic, often derived from a "high-culture" perspective.

This chapter presents a summary of past ways of looking at audiences and shows how audiences are being considered today. Ang's approach downplays the power of the media to create universally understood messages and emphasizes instead how people make meanings. "Watching television," or participating in any media event, is not a one-dimensional activity that has equivalent meanings or significance for all people at all times. Men and women, boys and girls, different ethnic groups and subcultures—all participate and perceive differently. For instance, adolescent girls may appreciate Madonna for her image of independence; men may appreciate her sexuality. The internationally popular television series *Dallas* was one thing for Americans, but something else again for Asian viewers.

Although the nature of the media "audience" is not very well understood, either by commercial concerns interested in creating audiences or by media analysts embroiled in professional controversy, the changing perspectives on this study and the promise of real information about our roles as media audiences are intriguing. Audiences are what we are.

Our everyday lives are permeated by the mass media. At home, you may casually watch TV together with your family, or listen to a CD you have just bought. Driving to school in your car, you may have

the car radio on as you pass dozens of huge billboards along the road that are there to be seen but that you hardly notice. Or you may wear your Walkman headphones and listen to some music while waiting for the subway. During lunch hour, you may read today's newspaper or exchange the latest gossip about the love lives of the stars. Meanwhile, your VCR is taping your favorite soap opera so you can watch it after school. On the weekend, you go to a movie with a date, or you go dancing until late at night to the latest dance hits. Alternatively, you may decide to stay home and read an engrossing science fiction novel or browse through a stack of magazines. In all these activities, you are part of the media audience. Or, to put it more precisely, you are a member of many different media audiences at once. How can we make sense of this fact? What does it mean for us to live as audience members for the mass media?

These are interesting and important questions, but, strangely enough, communication scholars have not come up with too many satisfactory answers so far. Our knowledge about the nature of media audiences is thus rather limited. This is because the most influential conceptions of the audience are incapable of doing justice to the heterogeneous ways in which, as the summary above suggests, the media are used and take on meanings for people. In the next section, I describe two of these dominant conceptions: the audience as *mass* and the audience as *market*. In the past few decades, however, more and more communication scholars have realized the limitations of these conceptions and have attempted to develop new perspectives on media audiences. In a subsequent section, I will go into some of the more recent perspectives on media audiences. In these perspectives, theory and research are designed precisely to get a more nuanced picture of the specific social and cultural meanings of media use and reception for people in different contexts. I close the chapter with some concluding remarks.

Classic Conceptions: The Audience as Mass and Market

The term *mass audience* is easily associated with the media because the media are generally assumed to involve processes of mass communication. The concept of "mass" was especially influential in the first half of this century. At that time, media such as the cinema and radio made their entrance and rapidly gained a popularity that was unprecedented.

These media attracted millions of people, a startling development that concerned many cultural observers and critics. They saw these popular media as important constituents of what they called a "mass society," and perceived their audiences as "masses" who absorb "mass culture." Sociologist Herbert Blumer (1950) describes "the mass" as follows:

First, its membership may come from all walks of life, and from all distinguishable social strata; it may include people of different class position, of different vocation, of different cultural attainment, and of different wealth. One can recognize this in the case of the mass of people who follow a murder trial. *Secondly*, the mass is an anonymous group, or more exactly is composed of anonymous individuals. *Third*, there exists little interaction or change of experience between members of the mass. They are usually physically separated from one another, and, being anonymous, do not have the opportunity to mill as do members of the crowd. *Fourth*, the mass is very loosely organized and is not able to act with the concertedness or unity of a crowd.

The conception of media audiences as masses, then, emphasizes their large size and sees them as composed of isolated and unknown individuals. Although this conception was presented as a purely descriptive way of perceiving audiences, it is surrounded by many additional, evaluative meanings, which are usually very negative. Because the model held that community and religious organizations no longer helped people understand the world, the mass was often seen as individualized, essentially passive, and easily manipulated. It is therefore not surprising that a lot of early fears about the powers of the media were fed by the idea of the mass. Some early theorists were concerned that the media, and especially very popular media such as movies, radio, and later television, were acting like "hypodermic needles"—injecting messages directly into the veins of their completely defenseless viewers and listeners. More generally, the mass audience was often looked down on as made up of people with low taste and intelligence.

An early example of the condescending image of media audiences that was derived from the conception of mass is the following description of the "typical" radio listener. It comes from Roy Durstine, a very prominent advertising agency executive in the 1930s:

The typical listening audience for a radio program is a tired, bored, middle-aged man and woman whose lives are empty and who have exhausted their sources of outside amusement when they have taken a quick look at an

evening paper. . . . Radio provides a vast source of delight and entertainment for the barren lives of the millions. (quoted in Stampfs, 1979)

We should add that similar views can still be heard, but nowadays more often in relation to television than to radio. It is now the television audience that is still occasionally perceived as a huge mass of more or less passive, faceless viewers, as the expression *couch potatoes* suggests.

In sum, the concept of the mass can be criticized because it does not give us any understanding of the worlds of media audiences themselves. After all, would we see ourselves as passive, easily manipulated, and anonymous while we are watching television? As British cultural analyst Raymond Williams (1961) has put it, there are in fact no masses, but "only ways of seeing people as masses." And those ways of seeing tend to be elitist and moralistic.

Another influential way of perceiving media audiences comes from the commercial context in which media industries operate. In this, audiences are seen as potential "consumers" of media material, as "market." Furthermore, they are seen as potential consumers for the products offered for sale in advertising, which forms the financial source for the production of media material (see Gandy, Chapter 13). However, because market researchers are generally concerned merely with quantitative and "objective" information about numbers of viewers, listeners, readers, and so on, they do not give us insight into the more qualitative and more "subjective" aspects of media consumption. Thus looking at ratings and similar figures does not give us any sense of what the experience of television viewing, music listening, or book reading means to people. As Todd Gitlin (1983), a critical communication scholar, has remarked about the meaning of ratings, "The numbers only sample sets tuned in, not necessarily shows watched, let alone grasped, remembered, loved, learned from, deeply anticipated, or mildly tolerated" (p. 54). Media sociologist Denis McQuail (1987) puts it this way: "The market view is inevitably the view from the media." We never conceive of ourselves as belonging to markets, rather we are placed in market categories or identified as part of a target group by others" (p. 221).

Changing Perspectives

Although the concepts of mass and market have very different origins, they also share some similar assumptions about the nature of

media audiences, of which two are most important. First, they tend to ignore the fact that media audiences consist of human beings who do not merely more or less passively respond to media output, but are actively involved, both emotionally and intellectually, with particular forms of media material. Second, they do not take account of the fact that we do not consume media material as isolated and solitary individuals, but in particular social settings and within certain cultural frameworks. Some communication scholars have long challenged the dominant concepts of mass and market. They have attempted to develop alternative perspectives on media audiences that emphasize the study of the meaning of media consumption as a social and cultural activity. The earliest attempts to do this were undertaken by researchers of the "uses and gratifications" tradition. Their starting point was that the media are functional for people, that using media gratifies certain needs and wants. Another group of researchers interested in audience activity consists of those who study media reception. These researchers are concerned with the ways in which people interpret and make sense of media texts. Finally, a recent trend within academic audience research is the growing awareness of the need to understand how mass media fit into the context of everyday life.

USES AND GRATIFICATIONS

Uses and gratifications researchers assume that media audiences are active in their choices of media material. From this perspective, the use of media is a highly selective and motivated activity, not just a mindless pastime. In general, people use the media because they expect that doing so will give them some gratifications—hence the name of this research tradition. These gratifications are assumed to be related with the satisfaction of social and psychological needs experienced by the individual (Blumler & Katz, 1974; Rosenberg, Palmgreen, & Wenner, 1985).

In typical empirical studies within this tradition, audience members are asked to fill out long questionnaires about why they watch certain television programs or pick out any other kind of media material. Over the years, responses gathered from these studies have shown a rather regular pattern. It turns out that the reasons repeatedly mentioned by people can be divided into the following categories [McQuail, 1987, p. 73]:

- *information*: finding out about society and the world, seeking advice on practical matters, satisfying curiosity and interest, learning
- *personal identity*: finding reinforcement for personal values, finding models for behavior, identifying with valued others, gaining insight into oneself
- *integration and social interaction*: gaining insight into circumstances of others, gaining a sense of belonging, finding a basis for conversation, helping to carry out social roles
- *entertainment*: being diverted from problems, relaxation, getting cultural and aesthetic pleasure and enjoyment, filling time, emotional release, sexual arousal

Most people will be able to recognize themselves in many of the items mentioned, and it has been the merit of uses and gratifications researchers that they have provided sufficient empirical evidence for all of them. That is, people turn to the media and make use of them for a variety of reasons, not just one. Yet there are also problems with this approach. I will sum up only some of the most important criticisms here (Elliot, 1974).

First of all, the approach is individualistic: It takes into account only individual uses of the media and the psychological gratifications derived from them. The fact that people get in touch with media in particular social contexts tends to be ignored. As a result, the approach does not take into consideration that some uses of the media are not related to the pursuit of gratifications at all. For example, some media use may be forced upon people rather than freely chosen. Think about parents who have to endure the sound of loud rock music because their teenage kids have the volume turned up, or about the resentment of sexist advertising felt by feminists.

A second problem has to do with the lack of attention within the approach to the content of media output. In other words, uses and gratifications researchers attempt to find out why people use media, but forget to analyze exactly what people get out of a TV show, a book, or a pop song. What is overlooked here are the meanings that people give to media culture.

Finally, there is a political problem that stems from the general starting point of the uses and gratifications approach. By emphasizing the fact that using the media is always functional to people—that is, that uses are always related to gratifications—the approach may implicitly offer a justification for the existing ways in which the mass

media are organized. If people always find some satisfaction in their media use, it could be argued, they must also be perfectly content with the material that is made available by the media. So we could all too easily conclude that because the media give us what we want, there is no reason whatsoever to change them. But this reasoning takes into account only what is actually available, ignoring the possibility that alternative kinds of media output (e.g., more documentaries or penetrating news reporting on television, or more programming for Blacks, gays, or other cultural and ethnic minorities) might be even more gratifying for many people.

RECEPTION ANALYSIS

Another group of researchers has taken up the task that was left aside by the uses and gratifications approach: They have started to examine how audiences construct meanings out of media offerings, generally called texts. This kind of research can be assembled under the heading of reception analysis.

The starting point here is the assumption that the meaning of media texts is not something fixed, or inherent within the text. Rather, media texts acquire meaning only at the moment of reception, that is, when they are read, viewed, listened to, and so on. In other words, audiences are seen as producers of meaning, not just consumers of media content: They decode or interpret media texts in ways that are related to their social and cultural circumstances and to the ways in which they subjectively experience those circumstances. From this perspective, reception researchers have begun to study the different ways diverse audience groups interpret the same media texts. Their interest is directed not to the individual ways in which people make sense of such texts, but to social meanings, that is, meanings that are culturally shared. Some reception researchers use the term "interpretive communities" to denote groups of people who make common interpretations of a text (Radway, 1987). We could also speak about "subcultures" (Hebdige, 1979) consisting of people who share a preference for a particular type of media material (e.g., soap opera lovers or heavy metal fans). Such communities or subcultures do not have to be physically united in one location; they can be geographically dispersed, and can consist of many different kinds of people who do not know each other, but are symbolically connected by their shared interest in a media product. In general, what reception researchers aim

to uncover is how people in their own social and historical contexts make sense of all kinds of media texts in ways that are meaningful, suitable, and accessible to them.

For example, it is interesting to see how a massively popular TV show such as *Dallas* has been received and interpreted by different groups and peoples throughout the world. For most Americans, the fact that the city of Dallas is the center of the Texas oil industry must be quite familiar knowledge. However, many people who live in Europe or in Third World countries and who watch *Dallas* may not even be sure where Texas is. As a result, it is very likely that they will interpret the story differently from Americans. Several researchers, among them Tamar Liebes and Elin Katz (1986) from Israel, have found that non-Americans are more ready to see in *Dallas* a "realistic" representation of America than are Americans themselves, who are more inclined to emphasize the showy aspects of the glamorous soap opera. Thus a viewer in a study conducted in Holland gave this comment about the *Ewings* of *Dallas*: "Actually they are all a bit stupid. And oversensational. Affected and genuinely American—money-appearance-relationship maniacs—family and nation, etc!" (Ang, 1985, p. 108). In short, although *Dallas* is an almost globally popular program, that does not mean that it is interpreted and made sense of in identical ways. *Dallas* is a different program in America than in Europe, and still different again in Nigeria or Japan.

However, this still does not mean that all Americans interpret *Dallas* or any other show in the same way. After all, there are many groups, communities, and subcultures within the United States, too, and according to reception researchers, each will "negotiate" the text in ways that make sense within its own social and cultural situation. For example, adolescent girl fans of Madonna (whose songs, films, performances, magazine interviews, and so on can be regarded as a set of texts) will interpret her in ways entirely different from those of male, middle-class readers of *Playboy*. The girls may adore and imitate her for her image of independence. As some girl fans say: "She's sexy but she doesn't need men. . . . She's kind of there all by herself" (quoted in Fiske, 1987). *Playboy* readers, on the other hand, may stress her sexual attractiveness to men in their reception.

Unlike uses and gratifications researchers, reception researchers do not usually use the standard questionnaire as a method of investigation. Instead, they use more small-scale, qualitative methods, such as group interviews and in-depth individual interviews, in which they try

to unravel the interpretations made of certain media content by a small group of viewers or readers. Thus they generally do not construct a complete set of categories such as the list of gratifications mentioned above. This is because they think that reception and the production of meaning cannot be isolated from the specific contexts in which they take place, and can be understood only meaningfully. Thus Radway (1984) has examined the ways in which a group of avid readers interpret romance novels; Hobson (1982) and Setter, Borchers, Kreutzer, and Warth (1991) have investigated how working-class women in England and the United States make sense of their favorite soap operas; and Peterson (1987) has studied the diverse meanings a group of college students attached to Cindy Lauper's pop song "Girls Just Want to Have Fun."

The perspective of reception analysis is not without its limitations, also. In their emphasis on interpretation and production of textual meaning, reception researchers still tend to isolate the text-audience relationship from the larger context in which the media are consumed by people. That context is everyday life, and it is to this important consideration that we now turn.

THE MEDIA IN EVERYDAY LIFE

Uses and gratifications researchers have attempted to answer the question of why people make use of media offerings. Reception researchers are interested in what people see in the media: which meanings they get out of it. The question being left out in both approaches, however, is the deceptively simple one of how people live with the media. In other words, How are the media integrated into our everyday lives?

One audience researcher who has begun to tackle this question is David Morley (1986), an Englishman. He remarks that when we examine what it means for people to watch television, it may be more important to look at the domestic context of family life in which people use television than to find out which interpretations people make of any particular type of programming. He is thus interested in the role of watching television in what he calls "the politics of the living room." The overall aim of Morley's research is to show that "watching television" cannot be assumed to be a one-dimensional activity that has equivalent meaning or significance at all times for all who perform it.

To illustrate this point, consider a woman saying the following: "Early in the evening we watch very little TV. Only when my husband

is in a real rage. He comes home, hardly says anything, and switches on the TV." According to Herman Bausinger (1984), a German researcher, in this case turning on the TV set doesn't signify "I would like to watch this," but rather, "I would like to hear and see nothing." Bausinger also sums up some general points we need to keep in mind when we want to understand the place of the media in everyday life. Here are the most important ones:

- To make a meaningful study of the use of the media, it is necessary to take all the different media into consideration and to examine the "media ensemble" that everyone deals with today. Audiences integrate the contents of radio, TV, newspapers, and other print media.
- As a rule, the media are not used completely or with full concentration. We read parts of sports reviews, skim through magazines, and zap from channel to channel when we don't like what's on TV.
- The media are an integral part of the routines and rituals of everyday life. Thus media use cannot be isolated, because it is constantly interrelated with other activities, such as talking or doing housework. In other words, "mass" communication and "interpersonal" communication cannot be separated.
- Media use is not an isolated, individual process, but a collective process. Even when reading the newspaper one is often not truly alone, but interacting with family, friends, colleagues.

In a study of the place of television viewing in family life, Morley (1986) interviewed 18 working-class families in London. Among the most interesting results of his study are the gender differences found in viewing preferences and styles. For example, the men in Morley's sample preferred to watch factual programs (news and sports), whereas the women preferred fiction (soap operas and other drama series). Furthermore, the men favored watching programs attentively ("in order not to miss anything"), whereas the women tended to combine their viewing with other activities, such as knitting, talking, and doing household chores. Indeed, many of the women felt that just watching television without doing anything else would be a waste of time. As one woman said: "You've got things to do, you know, and you can't keep watching television. You think, 'Oh my God, I should have done this or that.'" Another general conclusion Morley draws is that when the family is together, men are usually in control of the selection of programs. He remarks: "Masculine power is evident in a number of the families as the ultimate determinant on occasions of conflict over

viewing choices." He quotes one man as saying, "We discuss what we all want to watch and the biggest wins. That's me. I'm the biggest." Symbolic for the power exerted by the man in the house is his control over the remote control device, both for the TV set and for the VCR. One daughter in Morley's study said: "Dad keeps both the automatic controls—one on each side of the chair." This does not mean that women do not get the chance to watch their favorite programs, but more often than not they have to do it when they are alone, when other members of the family are "out of the way."

Of course, such gender-related patterns of viewing do not occur in all families. The situation may be different in families of different classes and ethnic backgrounds, in single-parent or two-career families, and so on. Still, that this is a predominant pattern in the United States has been confirmed by the work of several American researchers (e.g., Lindlof, Shatzer, & Wilkinson, 1988; Lull, 1982).

It is important to note that these patterns are not based either on differences between women and men or on a natural authority possessed by men. Rather, they are products of the particular social roles that men and women occupy within the American home. For men, the home is primarily defined as a place to rest from a hard day's work. Therefore, they tend to consider watching television as something they have naturally earned. Women, however, are usually the ones who are responsible for the well-being and care of family members and for running the household—even though today most women work outside the home as well. As a result, their television viewing is often interrupted by a continuing sense of domestic responsibility, and they often give up their own preferences in the service of others.

Research such as Morley's is beginning to map the intricate social circumstances in which patterns of media consumption are organized in people's day-to-day routines. Those relationships are shot through not only with pleasure and gratifications, but also with power and conflict. But much remains unknown about the place of the media in our everyday lives. Most of the research done so far has been limited to television, perhaps because it is the most widely used medium. Furthermore, it would be interesting to look not only at male-female relationships in terms of patterns of media consumption, but also at the relationships between children and parents, between siblings, between friends, colleagues, and so on—both at home and outside the home.

Even more than reception analysis, the study of media in everyday life depends on methods that are capable of capturing the fine-grained

details in which the media are part of our routine activities. It is for this reason that "ethnographic" approaches to the study of media audiences have recently gained interest among communication scholars. In such approaches, researchers attempt to come to culturally sensitive understandings of the complex subjective worlds of media audiences by using a variety of methods of investigation, such as depth interviewing and spending time with their subjects in participant observation.

Concluding Remarks

Media audiences are not "masses"—anonymous and passive aggregates of people without identity. Nor are they merely "markets"—the target groups of the media industries. This chapter has indicated how media audiences are active in the ways in which they use, interpret, and take pleasure in media products. That is to say, there are many different ways in which, and why, different people engage with different media. We cannot say in advance which meanings and effects media content will have on audiences. It will depend on who these people are (e.g., in terms of class, gender, race, religious conviction, regional or national background) and the specific social and cultural contexts in which these media are embedded when they "reach" their audiences. Furthermore, we have seen how the media have come to play a central role in the shaping and arrangement of our everyday lives and social relationships. That is, the media are now so pervasive—all around us, everywhere, all the time—that they virtually have become a natural part of our environment. For most of us who live in advanced capitalist industrial societies, life without media has become utterly unimaginable. It is this all-pervasiveness of media presence with which research into media audiences still has to come to terms.

A good example is the rise of CNN, the 24-hour cable news channel. For those who can receive it, CNN has made television news instantly available at all times of the day. This means that we no longer have to switch on at a particular time to catch the news; we can now watch anytime we want. In addition, CNN has also gained much success in covering the news "as it happens," for example, during the Gulf War and other world events. This means that we are now given the illusion that we can be direct witnesses to important things happening in distant parts of the world from the safety of our living rooms—the

world of the 1990s has become what Canadian media theorist Marshall McLuhan, back in the 1960s, called a "global village."

Finally, it is important to realize that we cannot examine the "nature" of audiences without considering the corporate strategies aimed at turning us into audiences. That is to say, we must realize that audiences are made, not naturally given. Take CNN again. Before this channel was available, few of us would have missed the opportunity to go "around the world in 30 minutes" (as one CNN slogan goes) at virtually any time of the day. Once the opportunity was there, however, some of us developed a "need" for it, just as people who never had television before the 1950s quickly got used to it and would have missed it if it had been taken away. In this respect, we must not forget that CNN is now also available in many parts of the world outside the United States. Yet the news put out by CNN remains distinctly American in terms of point of view, news values, ideological biases, language use, communication style, and so on. What are audiences outside of the United States to make of CNN's presentation of "world news"? Do they accept it as neutral and internationally valid, or recognize it—and perhaps discard it—as "typically American" in both content and form? We need to ask such questions if we are to understand the nature of media audiences throughout the world in the 1990s and beyond.

Further Questions

1. How might our patterns of consumption be influenced by the growing importance of new multimedia technologies?
2. How has CNN influenced Americans' news viewing habits? Who is most interested in watching CNN, and why? Has the availability of instant world news through CNN changed people's awareness of world events? If so, how?