10 The Nature of the Audience

IEN ANG

Ang, by contrast with Gandy in Chapter 11, focuses on explaining how audiences make sense of television, and the kinds of meanings and pleasures they derive from media in their everyday lives. Such an approach tends to downplay the "power" of the media to create universally understood messages, and examines instead how people make meanings. Ang reviews various theoretical models of the audience, including the notion of a "mass audience," and the original opposition view to it, the "uses and gratifications" approach. She shows, among other things, how new theories develop and how criticism of one approach becomes the basis for a different perspective. Ang also stresses how diverse audiences have diverse reactions, so that women do not use the media in the same way as men (a point elaborated by Rakow in Chapter 16). Similarly, members of racial, ethnic, and other minority groups might view certain news content or entertainment programming from a critical standpoint that is different from that of members of the dominant culture (a point elaborated by Corea in Chapter 18). Ang's emphasis, therefore, is on "active" and "diverse" audiences.

Our everyday lives are permeated by the mass media. At home, you may casually watch television together with your family, or listen to a record you have just bought. Driving to school in your car, you may have the car radio on, while you pass dozens of huge billboards along the road that are there to be seen but that you hardly notice. Or you wear your Walkman on your head, listening to some music while waiting for the subway. During lunch hour, you may be reading today's newspaper or exchanging the latest gossip about the love lives of the stars with your friends. Meanwhile, your VCR is taping your favorite soap opera so that you can watch it after school. On the weekend, you may go to a movie or go dancing to the latest dance hits. Alternatively, you may have decided to stay at home, reading an engrossing science fiction novel or browsing

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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, two of these dominant conceptions will be described: 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, some of the more recent perspectives on media audiences will be explored. 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. The chapter will end 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 film 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) described 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 exchange 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 their being 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 that are usually very negative. Since 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—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 upon as being composed 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 1930s advertising agency executive:

> 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 Stamps, 1979)

It should be added that similar views can still be heard, but nowadays more often in relation to television than in relation 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 name "couch potato" suggests.

In sum, the concept of the mass can be criticized because it does not give us any understanding of the world of media audiences themselves. After all, do 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" (p. 289). 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 Chapter 11). 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 communications 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). And media sociologist Denis McQuail (1987) has put 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 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 respond to media output more or less passively, but who 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 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, in which the study of the meaning of media consumption *as a social and cultural activity* is emphasized. 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 are 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 growing awareness of the necessity 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, and 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 to the satisfaction of social and psychological needs experienced by the individual (Blumler & Katz, 1974; Rosengren, Palmgreen, & Wenner, 1985).

In a typical empirical study within this tradition, audience members are asked to fill out a long questionnaire about why they watch a certain television program 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; it has been the merit of uses and gratifications researchers to 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. Only some of the most important criticisms will be summed up 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. For instance, think about parents who have to endure the sound of loud rock music because their teenage kids have turned the volume up. As another example: Feminists will resent sexist billboards.

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 are overlooked here are the *meanings* people give to media culture.

Finally, there is a political problem, which 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 that they must also be perfectly content with the material that is made available by the media. Thus 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, and ignores the possibility that alternative kinds of media output (e.g., more documentaries or penetrating news reporting on television, or more programing 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, or whatever. 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 way in which they subjectively experience those circumstances.

From this perspective, reception researchers have begun to study the different ways in which diverse audience groups interpret the same media text. Their interest is directed not to the individual ways in which

people make sense of such a text, but to social meanings, that is, meanings that are culturally shared. Some reception researchers have used 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, but 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 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 their interpretations of the story will be different from those of Americans. Several researchers, including Tamar Liebes and Elihu Katz from Israel, have found that non-Americans are more ready to see in *Dallas* a "realistic" representation of the United States than are Americans themselves, who are more inclined to emphasize the showy aspects of the glamorous soap opera (Liebes & Katz, 1986). Thus one viewer in another study from 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 the United States than in Europe, and still different again in Nigeria or Japan.

However, this still does not mean that all Americans will make the same interpretations of *Dallas* or any other show. After all, there are many groups, communities, and subcultures within the United States too, and, according to reception researchers, each will "negotiate" a text in ways that make sense within its 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 indepen-

dence. As one girl fan has said: "She's sexy but she doesn't need men. . . . She's kind of there all by herself" (Fiske, 1987). The *Playboy* readers, however, may stress her sexual attractiveness to men in their reception (Fiske, 1987).

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 (1987) has examined the ways in which a group of avid readers interpret romance novels; Hobson (1982) and Seiter, Borchers, Kreutzner, and Warth (1989) 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 give to Cyndi Lauper's pop song "Girls Just Want to Have Fun" (feminist approaches are explored further in Chapter 16).

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 turn now.

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 them. 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), from England. 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 his

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 researcher from West Germany, 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 that 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 examine the "media ensemble" that everyone deals with today. Audiences integrate the contents of radio, TV, and newspapers.
- 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, or colleagues.

In his 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 he found in viewing preferences and styles. For example, men prefer to watch factual programs (news and sports), while women prefer fiction (soap operas and other drama series). Furthermore, men more than women favor watching programs attentively ("in order not to miss anything"), while women tend to combine their viewing with other activities, such as knitting, talking, and doing household chores. Indeed, many women feel that just watching television without doing anything else would be a waste of time. As one woman says: "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 drawn by Morley is the fact that when the family is together, men are usually in control of the selection of programs. As Morley 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 remote control devices, both of the TV set and of the VCR. One daughter says: "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 class and ethnic backgrounds, in single-parent or two-career families, and so on. Still, that these are predominant patterns in the United States is confirmed by several American researchers (Lindlof, Shatzer, & Wilkinson, 1988; Lull, 1982).

It is important to note that these patterns are not based on differences between women and men or on a natural authority possessed by men. Rather, they are the effects 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, women's 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 is 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, among siblings, among friends and colleagues, and so on—both at home and outside it.

Even more than in 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 of studying media audiences have recently gained interest among communication scholars. In such

approaches, researchers attempt to come to a culturally sensitive understanding of the complex subjective worlds of media audiences, by using a variety of methods of investigation such as in-depth interviewing and spending time with their subjects in participant observation.

Conclusions

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. Media audiences are active in the ways in which they use, interpret, and take pleasure in media products. Furthermore, the media have come to play a central role in the shaping and arrangement of our everyday lives and social relationships. Why and how people engage with different media are issues that remain to be explored further.

Further Questions

(1) How do we account for the vast differences in taste and preference among media audiences, and how do we understand the power of the media if people actively engage with media in their own ways?

(2) How might our patterns of media consumption be influenced by the growing importance of new technologies such as video and the computer?

(3) Which content areas in the present structure of the media could, from the perspective of media audiences, be improved?