

I wonder if you might be interested in a research project which is currently under development. I hope you won't mind me approaching you about this, but I hope it will be clear why I do, when you read on.

I am guessing that you remember the Lord of the Rings world audience project which was mounted with considerable success in 2003-4. That brought together researchers in 19 countries, attracted 25,000 responses to its core questionnaire, and taught us a great deal about the place and role of fantasy in people's lives.

A few months ago three of us took the decision to mount another attempt at this, using the films of The Hobbit. The central aim will be to build on what we learnt back in 2003 about the way responses to a film like this are spread and patterned across the world. This time, though, we are planning to take advantage of the deeper penetration of the internet, and work only through an online questionnaire which combines in important ways quantitative and qualitative questions. To date, we have 25 countries committed to taking part, but we are keen to expand even further, if we can. This would mean, among other things, that the questionnaire would be made available in the languages appropriate to all those countries (which this time will include some in Africa, and Latin and south America, as well as more in Asia). We believe that we should be able, with ease and very little effort or expense, to recruit over 50,000 responses - which would give us the largest ever research database on film audiences - and of course everyone who participates in the project will have complete access to the entire thing.

Without me going on at great length about this in this first email, does this potentially hold any interest for you? We have researchers in Slovenia, Poland and Hungary, and may yet have them in Rumania and Croatia. But currently we do not have anyone in the Czech Republic.

If this holds any attraction to you at all, I will be happy to tell you much more.

Best wishes  
Martin Barker  
(and Ernest Mathijs and Matt Hills)

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Dear colleagues

UPDATE ON PREPARATIONS FOR THE INTERNATIONAL HOBBIT AUDIENCE PROJECT

We thought it was time to send a quite brief update to everyone who has expressed an interest in joining this project. It will of course be a little while before we formally ask people to indicate their intention to take part (around June this year), and a long time before the project finally launches (December 2014). The Formal Invitation will go out once we have confirmed the funding to create the website, questionnaire and database (which we should receive in March). But we are keen to keep everyone informed on progress – and indeed to ask for help now on one thing.

When we put in our bid for funding, we had to explain the purposes of the project. In our first attempt to say this, we explained its goals through five questions we believe we can substantially contribute to answering:

- 1) How does something originating as an English children's story acquire meaning and value for different audiences across the world?
- 2) How are responses to *The Hobbit* related to age, sex, relative wealth, nationality and reading experience?
- 3) How does wider knowledge of Tolkien's work, and of Jackson's films, relate to engagements?
- 4) How are vernacular labels of the film patterned, and how do they relate to interpretive strategies (for example, valuing particular elements of the story)?
- 5) How do different audiences relate their responses to wider (real, virtual or imagined) communities?

Clearly in the quite short space of a grant application form, we had to restrict ourselves. And it will be interesting to hear, once we start debating the project in detail in the summer, how others among you may want to amend or add to these questions. We want to say one thing here: although all the questions are important, the final one is to us really special. We very much hope that we can design this research in a way that we can bring substantial empirical evidence to bear on two emerging areas, where currently talk and claims seem to outrun evidence: the widely-used idea of "interpretive communities"; and the idea of 'digital cinema'.

First, who has indicated strong interest in taking part? Below is the list of countries/language-areas where researchers have responded positively to our approach – currently 29 in all. This is very encouraging. We believe that there are other interested researchers whom we have yet to establish contact with, in Croatia, and Rumania.

Countries/language-areas where researchers have expressed an interest in joining the project:

Australia

Arab States

Belgium

Canada

China

Croatia

Czech Republic

Denmark

Finland

France

Germany

Greece

Hong Kong

Hungary

India

Mexico

New Zealand

Nigeria

Poland

Portugal

Slovenia

South Africa

South Korea

Spain

Sweden

Turkey

United States

United Kingdom

Uruguay

In addition, we have interest declared by a group in the UK who specialise in children's reading, and are linked to international networks. The wonderful thing about this list, as compared with the spread of research with the previous *Lord of the Rings* project, is that it now reaches into all continents.

But we would very much like to locate researchers who would be interested in other countries. And we simply wanted to ask if any of you have colleagues, contacts or friends in countries outside this list, whom we could and should approach. Are there audience/reception researchers whom you know in other parts of Africa, in South America, or in Japan, for instance? Or how about researchers within particular Arab-speaking countries? The wider we can spread the net, and the more languages we can offer the questionnaire in, the richer will be our dataset and materials.

The first part of the film has of course now been released. It has been interesting to track responses to it informally. It has done well at the box office (we have not been able to find country-specific figures in all cases). But critical opinion is reserved. People are very aware of the connection and comparison with the Lord of the Rings. There has been a lot of discussion about the benefits or otherwise of the style of digital film-making. IMDb has the film slightly more popular among women than men – but with a real spread of ages responding to it. All of which is good for us, because it means that we should manage to recruit a good mix of people, and a good mix of kinds of responses. All good for the research mill!

We are very much looking forward to working with you all, and will keep you informed of all developments. If you have any questions at this stage, we will do our best to answer them.

Best wishes,

Martin Barker

Ernest Mathijs

Matt Hills