

Media Studies Key Concepts

Audience

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Introducing Audience

It is virtually impossible these days to go through a day without encountering the media in some form. You may wake up to the sound of the radio, play a walkman on your way into college, pass billboards in the street and watch television or go to a film in the evening. We are all therefore part of the audience for these different kinds of media products, but what does this rather obvious statement actually mean?

Since the early days of the media this question has been discussed widely throughout the world. Some people have seen media audiences as being easily manipulated masses of people who can be persuaded to buy products through advertising, or to follow corrupt leaders through propaganda. There have also been fears that the contents of media texts can make their audiences behave in different ways – become more violent for example. On the other hand there have been other critics who have seen the media as having much less influence and working in more subtle ways.

Historical background

All of the different media that we think of as “The Media” are actually quite recent inventions. If you were living a hundred and fifty years ago photography, film, television, radio and computers as we know them would all have seemed like fantasies. The cliché about pre-media times is that people made their own entertainment and there is obviously some truth in this. The kinds of things that people did in their leisure time were either likely to be fairly independent things such as reading, or they would involve mixing with many other people such as going to a play or musical.



The arrival of the media changed a lot of this: while films are often watched in theatre sized audiences. The vast majority of our times with the media are spent on our own or in small groups so in one sense the media can seem to split people up – you have probably heard the worry from parents that since the arrival of video games and portable televisions, children don't go out as much as they used to. On the other hand, there is an opposite sense in which the media can be seen to bring us closer together: if you watch a soap or look at a picture in the paper of Mike Tyson, the chances are that millions of people across Britain or even the world will have experienced the same media event. This brings with it

another fear – that because so many people are seeing the same things and because they are often experiencing them alone without anyone to explain what is good and bad about them, the media has an unprecedented power to affect us in negative ways.

The Audience as “Mass”

The key ideas about media audiences that you should remember from the last section are these:

- The media are often experienced by people alone. (Some critics have talked about media audiences as atomised – cut off from other people like separate atoms)
- Wherever they are in the world, the audience for a media text are all receiving exactly the same thing.

As you will see from what follows, both of these ideas have been questioned.

These points led some early critics of the media to come up with the idea of media audiences as masses. According to many theorists, particularly in the early history of the subject, when we listen to our CDs or sit in the cinema, we become part of a mass audience in many ways like a crowd at a football match or a rock concert but at the same time very different because separated from all the other members of this mass by space and sometimes time.

The rest of this section will trace the history of this idea and attempt to question how well it works.

If you look at the early history of the media, it is fairly easy to see where the idea of a mass audience came from. Within less than a hundred years photography, film, radio and television were all invented. Each one of them allowed works of art or pieces of entertainment that might once have been restricted to the number of people who could fit into an art gallery or a theatre to be transmitted in exactly the same form to enormous numbers of people in different parts of the world. It can be very easy, living in this media saturated world to forget how strange this might once have seemed. These media quickly became extremely popular and at the same time there was an important difference between them and older forms of entertainment. Whereas in the past, many forms of entertainment were only available to those who could afford them, now suddenly films and radio particularly were available to all. Early media theorists struggled to understand this and found it easiest to compare the media audiences with the kinds of crowds they were used to from the world before the media – they came up with the ideas of the mass audience. Here is how the sociologist Herbert Blumer described it in 1950:

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.

Secondly, the mass is an anonymous group, or more exactly is composed of anonymous individuals [*Blumer means anonymous in the sense that unlike the citizens of earlier communities, the people who are members of the mass audience for the media do not know each other*].

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.

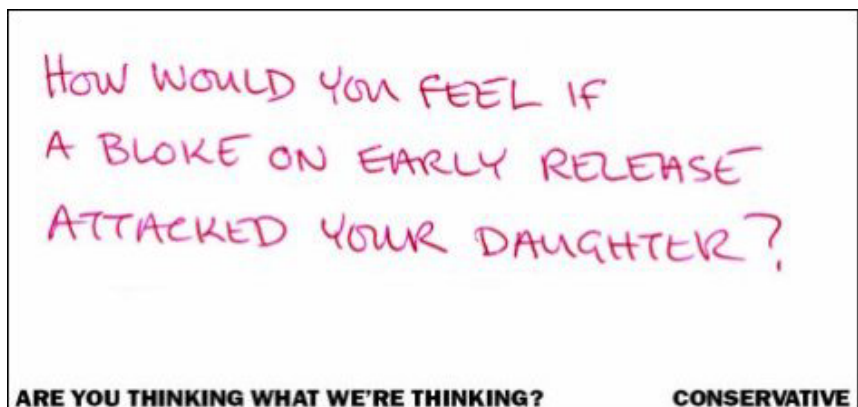
Fourth, the mass is very loosely organised and is not able to act with the unity of a crowd.

TASK

It is worth thinking about some of Blumer's ideas in more detail:

1. Do you think the audiences for most media texts do come "from all walks of life" or do different kinds of people watch very different kinds of programme? Are there any examples of media texts that you can think of that do seem to have audiences of all kinds of people?
2. How much of your media experience occurs when you are on your own and how much when you are with others?
3. Are there any ways in which you share your experiences of the media with other people who weren't around when you experienced the text?

Blumer was writing about the media in 1950, five years after the second world war. During the war and before it, Hitler in Germany and Stalin in Russia had attempted to use the media as propaganda – through films, radio and poster art they had attempted to persuade mass audiences to follow their policies – to the critics of the time it is not surprising that the media must have seemed like a dangerous weapon in the wrong hands, capable of persuading millions to follow evil men. In the recent general election, you will have found it difficult to avoid seeing similar, if less offensive propaganda. How much influence do you think the posters that covered Britain's roadsides might have had on the final outcome of the election? It is impossible to give a certain answer to this, but the different political parties obviously believe in their power, if you consider the millions of pounds they spend on them.



Defining audiences: the mass *market*

For many obvious reasons, media producers and institutions like to consider audiences in groups. This is particularly true of advertisers, who have led the way in targeting groups of consumers.

It wasn't just academic theorists who were interested in audiences and their relationship with the media texts they encountered. The producers of media texts and the advertisers who used them were if anything even more interested in these audiences who they could contact through the new media. To investigate exactly how large their share of the mass market was, television companies and advertisers pioneered new techniques of market research which involved quantitative surveys where they attempted to count how many people they reached. The most obvious example of this is the system of television ratings which still has enormous effect on the workings of TV stations. You may be able to think of a show that you enjoyed which was taken off because it did not achieve high enough ratings. If so you may agree with the thinking of Todd Gitlin:

“The numbers only sample sets tuned in, not necessarily shows watched, let alone grasped, remembered, loved, learned from, deeply anticipated, or mildly tolerated”

Media producers and institutions quickly identified that there was not just one audience, or one market. The audience can be segmented, and marketed to in different ways depending on the way they have been defined. We'll cover this more closely in our study of advertising and marketing. but it's worth taking a quick look now.

Obvious ways to classify audiences are by *age*, *gender*, *race* and *location* (where they live). Others include the following:

Income bracket/status

One way to classify audiences is by their *class*, which is normally judged on the kind of job the main wage-earner of the householder has.

A	Upper middle class Top management, bankers, lawyers, doctors and other professionals
B	Middle class Middle management, teachers, many 'creatives' eg graphic designers etc
C1	Lower middle class Office supervisors, junior managers, nurses, specialist clerical staff etc
C2	Skilled working class Skilled workers, tradespersons (white collar)
D	Working class Semi-skilled and unskilled manual workers (blue collar)
E	People at lowest level of income Unemployed, students, pensioners, casual workers

Young and Rubicam's Four Consumers

As the concept of class became less fashionable, advertisers started thinking about audiences in different ways. One of the best-known was devised by the advertising agency Young and Rubicam.



What kind of an audience would this car appeal to?

Mainstreamers	Make up 40% of the population. They like security, and belonging to a group.
Aspirers	Want status and the esteem of others. Like status symbols, designer labels etc. Live off credit and cash.
Succeeders	People who have already got status and control.
Reformers	Define themselves by their self-esteem and self-fulfilment.

Values, Attitudes and Lifestyles

This approach is similar to Young and Rubicam's but offers a more sophisticated range of descriptors for audiences based on – well, you read the title!

TASK	
See if you can write your own definitions for each of the following VAL descriptors.	
Actualisers	
Fulfilleds	
Achievers	

Experiencers	
Believers	
Strivers	
Makers	
Strugglers	

Now take a look at Nick Lacey's Media Institutions and Audiences, pp 183-4, and see how close you were.

LifeMatrix

One of the latest approaches to audience targeting has grown out of the field of Market Research. The LifeMatrix tool, launched by MRI and RoperASW, defines ten audience categories, centred around both values, attitudes and beliefs, *and* more fundamental, demographic audience categories.

1. **Tribe wired** Digital, free-spirited, creative young singles
2. **Fun/Atics** Aspirational, fun-seeking, active young people
3. **Dynamic Duos** Hard-driving, high-involvement couples
4. **Priority Parents** Family values, activities, media strongly dominate
5. **Home Soldiers** Home-centric, family-oriented, materially ambitious
6. **Renaissance Women** Active, caring, affluent, influential mums
7. **Rugged Traditionalists** Traditional male values, love of outdoors
8. **Struggling Singles** High aspirations, low economic status
9. **Settled elders** Devout, older, sedentary lifestyles
10. **Free Birds** Vital, active, altruistic seniors

Counting the audience

Audience reaction to even early versions of a media text is closely watched. Hollywood studios routinely show a pre-release version of every movie they make to a test audience, and will often make changes to the movie that are requested by that audience.

Different types of media texts measure their audiences in different ways.

Film	<p>Figures are based on box office receipts, rather than the number of people who have actually seen the movie. Subtract the production costs of a movie from the box office receipts to find out how much money it made, and therefore how successful it has been in the profit-driven movie business. Be aware that a film which does not cost much to make (eg <i>The Blair Witch Project</i>) and takes even a modest amount at the box office can be considered a greater success than a big action movie which cost more, has a bigger set of box office receipts (ie lots more people went to see it) but has a smaller profit margin.</p> <p>Also be aware that film companies are very coy about publishing production costs of a movie, and that they rarely include the cost of a film's marketing budget, which is probably at least a third again of the production costs, and is frequently more. In some cases, the marketing budget may exceed the cost of originally making the film - <i>Four Weddings & a Funeral's</i> American marketing spend is an example of this.</p>
Print	<p>Magazines and newspapers measure their circulation (ie numbers of copies sold). They are open about these figures - they have to be as these are the numbers quoted to advertisers when negotiating the price of a page.</p>
Radio/TV	<p>Measuring the number of viewers and listeners for a TV/Radio programme or whole station's output is a complex business. Generally, an audience research agency (eg BARB) will select a sample of the population and monitor their viewing and listening habits over the space of 7 days. The data gained is then extrapolated to cover the whole population, based on the percentage sample. It is by no means an accurate science. The numbers obtained are known as the viewing figures or ratings.</p>

Influencing the audience

If audience *is* a mass, it raises all kinds of questions about the power of the media to influence people – not just individuals, but whole sectors of society. There have been a number of theories over the years about how exactly the media work on the mass audience. Some of them are outlined below.

The Effects / Hypodermic model

Perhaps the most simple to understand is the hypodermic syringe this has been very popular down the years with many people who fear the effects of the media. It grew out of what is referred to as The Frankfurt School, a group of German Marxists in the 1930s who witnessed first hand how Hitler used propaganda to influence a nation. The Communists in the Soviet Union had a similar impact.

According to the theory the media is like a syringe which injects ideas, attitudes and beliefs into the audience who as a powerless mass have little choice but to be influenced – in other words, you watch something violent, you may go and do something violent, you see a woman washing up on TV and you will want to do the same yourself if you are a woman and if you are a man you will expect women to do the washing up for you.



This theory has been particularly popular when people have been considering violence in films and indeed you will be spending longer later in the course considering this question. There have been films such as The Exorcist (Friedkin, 1973 – see image, left) and A Clockwork Orange (Kubrick, 1971) which have been banned in the past, partly because of a belief that they might encourage people to copy the crimes within them. On the other hand no-one has ever really claimed that every-one will be affected by these texts in the same way. Many people have therefore seen the theory as simplistic because it doesn't take any account of people's individuality and yet it is still very popular in society particularly for politicians looking for reasons why society has become more violent which can't be blamed on them. Every time a young person does something violent and makes the news, newspapers and MPs will try to link their crime to video violence.

Another interesting example of the theory in action is the serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer. Before every one of his murders, he watched a clip from his favourite film in order to get himself excited. This is the kind of fact that might seem to prove the hypodermic syringe theory but the film was Star Wars (Lucas, 1977) and no-one has ever suggested that that should be banned – clearly the film meant very different things to him to what it means for you or me.

The theory: Violence in the Media encourages viewers to imitate what they see

Consider the following:

- a. After Brixton riots were reported, there were "copycat" riots around Britain.
- b. James Bulger was murdered by two children. Media reporting suggested they were influenced by violent videos
- c. In an experiment with groups of children:
 - Group 1 saw real-life male and female adults attacking a self-righting doll with mallets.
 - Group 2 saw a film of the same.
 - Group 3 saw a T.V. cartoon version of the same thing.

Then each child was deliberately mildly frustrated by being put in a room with a lot of exciting toys but told they were reserved for other children.

Left alone, the children acted out their frustration in much the form they had just been exposed to.

You should also consider this:

- a. Did anyone prove they were 'copycat' riots?
- b. Just because the media said they watched violent films, does that make it true?
- c. Children can be just as adept as adults at sensing what is expected of them and acting upon it – making this experiment potentially unreliable.

TASK

It is obviously easy to find reasons why the hypodermic syringe theory could never apply to everyone equally. But do you think it could work sometimes? What about you – can you think of any media texts which you feel have had a big effect on you and made you behave in any way differently?

The Cultivation/Culmination theory

Because of the difficulty of proving the effects of individual media texts on their audience a more refined version of the theory has been created called the cultivation model:

According to this, while any one media text does not have too much effect, years and years of watching more violence will make you less sensitive to violence, years and years of watching women being mistreated in soaps will make you less bothered about it in real life. We refer to this process as desensitisation.

One difficulty with both of these ways of looking at the media is that they are very difficult to prove either way. Many people have a general sense that the media do affect our behaviour and advertisers certainly justify their fees by working on this assumption, but it can be extraordinarily difficult to actually prove how much effect if any a text might have on an audience. In fact researchers have spent enormous amounts of time and effort trying to prove the validity of the cultivation theory with no success – this of course does not mean that there is no truth in it as an idea.

The theory (1): Violence in the Media de-sensitises the audience to violence in general.

According to this theory, violence in the media excites children but the more they see, the more they need to excite them. The result being that they become less shocked by real life violence. The first part is fine but it is very difficult to prove whether the second follows on from it.

The theory (2): Violence in the media erodes inbuilt inhibitions against acting in certain ways.

This suggests that inhibitions about sexual and violent behaviour are broken down if it is seen as normal on the screen, particularly if such behaviour is seen as being unpunished in films etc. Worth thinking about here is the frequency of violence against women in the media.

W. Belson interviewed 1,565 boys between 12 and 17 with detailed questionnaires intending to establish both how violent they were and also when they became this violent. At the same time, he researched their TV viewing history. He found that: "Children who tend to watch violent TV programmes do become more violent themselves to some extent, largely because violence comes to be seen as a legitimate problem solving



device for them."

Children and TV: it's not all Teletubbies

A National viewers' survey of 4,500 children between seven and sixteen in 1984 found that 45% had seen a video nasty, however, a similar survey with made up names of video nasties found that about the same proportion of children claimed to have seen them as well!

A survey of child psychiatrists found that 50% thought that there was an association between their patients' symptoms and viewing violent screen images but the case is by no means proven. Often surveys can only show that violent people enjoy violent programmes.

Two more theories: Identification & Sensitisation

Identification: Violence in the media releases tension and desires through identification with fictional characters and events (catharsis)

Again all research on this is inconclusive but some psychiatrists claim to have successfully used pornography to help sex offenders release their emotions.

Sensitisation: Violence in the media can sensitise people to the effects of violence

Obviously the opposite of 2 above. Again difficult to prove, but when filmed in a certain way, (e.g. Taxi Driver?) violence can be so shocking as to put people off violence and make them more aware of its consequences. Sensitisation to certain crimes, it is argued, could make people more aware and more likely to report them.

Criticisms of mass audience theory

Some critics of these kinds of theory have argued that the problem is not just with the idea that the media has such obvious effects, but about the assumptions that mass audience theory makes about the members of the audience. If you have discussed this earlier, you may have come up with some possible problems with it as a way of analysing people's behaviour. Critics of the idea often claim that it is elitist – in other words that it suggests a value judgement about these masses – that they are easily led and not so perceptive and self-aware as the theorists who are analysing them. Here for example is a 1930's advertising executive talking about the radio audience of his day:

“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.”

The chances are that you have heard similar comments about the viewers of soaps or quiz shows or even that you have made them yourself. The phrase couch potato has this kind of idea behind it – that watching the television is in some way brain numbing compared with other possible forms of entertainment.

TASK

Think about this for yourself – are there any forms of media that you think society gives greater status to. For example which do people see as “better”: films or television, soaps or detective dramas, opera or Britpop. Do you have any feelings about the kinds of audience these different forms of media attract – are some likely to be more thoughtful and more intelligent than others?

One problem that people have suggested with mass audience theory is that it relies on the assumptions of the people analysing the masses. The early theorists who came up with the idea were generally lovers of classical music and hated television and so they tended to look down at the viewers of television who they saw as “the mass.” You may have done the same kind of thing in reverse just now when you were analysing the audience of opera compared to britpop. There is obviously a problem with this if any theory ends up as just being a chance for people to air their prejudices.

To try to make a final judgement about mass audience theory, you really need to carefully question its main assumptions

These key ideas are that:

- The media are often experienced by people alone. (Some critics have talked about media audiences as atomised – cut off from other people like separate atoms)
- Wherever they are in the world, the audience for a media text are all receiving exactly the same thing.

An atomised audience?

The first idea seems to be suggesting that because we often watch the media independently, it has more chance of affecting us. Certainly many parents think this is true and will make a

point of sitting with their young children while they watch potentially disturbing programmes so that they can have some influence on the way the children take in the messages and explain confusing issues, but do you feel adults need to be protected in the same ways. Some of the critics of the idea of the mass audience have pointed out the many ways that individuals who watch programmes alone will then share their experience with others in conversations about what they have seen. One argument is that these kinds of conversations have much more influence on potential behaviour than the programme from which they may have sprung.

The two step flow

The Hypodermic model proved too clumsy for media researchers seeking to more precisely explain the relationship between audience and text. As the mass media became an essential part of life in societies around the world and did not reduce populations to a mass of unthinking drones, a more sophisticated explanation was sought.

Paul Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson, and Hazel Gaudet analysed the voters' decision-making processes during a 1940 presidential election campaign and published their results in a paper called *The People's Choice*. Their findings suggested that the information does not flow directly from the text into the minds of its audience unmediated but is filtered through "opinion leaders" who then communicate it to their less active associates, over whom they have influence. The audience then mediate the information received directly from the media with the ideas and thoughts expressed by the opinion leaders, thus being influenced not by a direct process, but by a two step flow. This diminished the power of the media in the eyes of researchers, and caused them to conclude that social factors were also important in the way in which audiences interpreted texts. This is sometimes referred to as the limited effects paradigm.

TASK
Think about this honestly – are your opinions about television, films or groups ever influenced by other people?

Are we all watching the same text?

The second major idea of the mass audience theory was that the mass were all watching the same text. This suggests that a single film will be the same for every person who watches it.

You should by now have a fairly clear idea of what the teachers on your course think of this idea. The basis of A level Media Studies is that each of you has an individual way of seeing any media text and that your ideas are equally valid to ours. In other words we might interpret Fatal Attraction (Lyne, 1987) as being a sexist film but you have a perfect right to argue an opposite case – we could experience the same text in very different ways – so different, in fact that my Fatal Attraction could almost be another text to the one that you saw. You'll read more about the theory behind these different readings of texts later in this booklet.

As I have said – we virtually take this idea for granted in our teaching, but that doesn't mean that you should do so when you are making your mind up about mass audience theory. When we are placing so much emphasis on the individual's ability to make up their own minds about media texts, are we risking ignoring the real dangers that some texts are somehow more powerful than others and more likely to have a bad influence on their viewers.

Modern versions of the effects model

The Frankfurt School

The founders of the Frankfurt school of thought were left-wing and clearly under threat in the context of pre-war Nazi Germany. They moved to America and refined their model in an era of expanding media output in post-war America. They articulated criticisms of a capitalist system which controlled media output, creating a stupefying mass culture that eliminated or marginalised opposition or alternatives.

Their approach to audience analysis ultimately fell out of favour because it suggested that America would ultimately become a fascist state, in which people were controlled through popular culture.

Moral Panic

A less theoretical variant of the effects model was developed in response to the violent content of certain TV programmes. Some of the moral watchdogs, or the 'moral majority' as they styled themselves, took issue with TV output that was deemed to be explicitly sexual, too violent or in other ways offensive. (Ironically, given the socialist thinking of its originators, these moral watchdogs tended to be conservative, rather than liberal, thinkers.) Their concerns were for those vulnerable members of the population who could be corrupted as a result of such material. Perhaps the best known of these groups in the UK was the National Viewers and Listeners Association (pioneered by Mary Whitehouse, right) which argued that TV was a direct cause of deviant behaviour, especially among the young.



This is where the idea of **moral panics** begins: a populist version of the effects model, which makes direct connections between media messages and audience behaviour. The term was first used by British sociologists in the early 1970s to describe media coverage of the violent rivalry between Mods and Rockers in the 1960s. Arguably, however, the phenomenon had been around a lot longer.

While the theoretical model is disputed, it is constantly revived by politicians and social commentators when moral panics are generated around issues such as 'video nasties' and their influence on children (eg the Bulger case) or computer games allegedly damaging literacy skills or contributing to violent behaviour (eg the *Doom* computer game). Such concerns often try to scapegoat parts of media output as if these were the sole relevant factor in anti-social behaviour. This approach ignores the other factors that work as a mix to influence behaviour i.e. home, school, peers and social interaction.

The Audience as *people*

If we cannot confidently examine audience as a mass, how *can* we theorise about audience responses to the media?

Uses and Gratifications

This is probably the most important theory for you to know. According to uses and gratification theory, we all have different uses for the media and we make choices over what we want to watch. In other words, when we encounter a media text, it is not just some kind of mindless entertainment – we are expecting to get something from it: some kind of gratification.

In this model the individual has the power and she selects the media texts that best suit her needs and her attempts to satisfy those needs. The psychological basis for this model is the *Hierarchy of Needs* identified by Maslow. Among the chief exponents of this model are McQuail and Katz.

But what does it actually mean? What kinds of gratification can we be getting? In general researchers have found four:

1. **Information:** we want to find out about society and the world – we want to satisfy our curiosity. This would fit the news and documentaries which both give us a sense that we are learning about the world.
2. **Personal Identity:** we may watch the television in order to look for models for our behaviour. So, for example, we may identify with characters that we see in a soap. The characters help us to decide what we feel about ourselves and if we agree with their actions and they succeed we feel better about ourselves – think of the warm feeling you get when your favourite character triumphs at the end of a programme.
3. **Integration and Social Interaction:** we use the media in order to find out more about the circumstances of other people. Watching a show helps us to empathise and sympathise with the lives of others so that we may even end up thinking of the characters in programme as friends even though we might feel a bit sad admitting it! At the same time television may help us to get on with our real friends as we are able to talk about the media with them.
4. **Entertainment:** sometimes we simply use the media for enjoyment, relaxation or just to fill time.

You can probably recognise yourself in some of these descriptions and not surprisingly uses and gratification theory has become quite popular amongst media critics. It is important to remember with this theory that it is likely that with any media text you enjoy, you will be getting a number of gratifications from it and not just one

However, despite this popularity amongst critics, there have also been criticisms made of some features of the theory. First of all, it ignores the fact that we do not always have complete choice as to what we receive from the media. Think, for example, about your family who may end up having to listen to the same music as you sometimes. Similarly, you don't have that much choice about the posters that you see on your way to college however objectionable you may find some of them.

A second problem relates to this last example. The poster that you see on a billboard, may be extremely sexist. However, you clearly cannot choose a different poster that you want to see that you might find more pleasant. If you think about it, this problem also affects us in our

other encounters with the media – we are generally having to choose the media that we consume from what is available. This undermines the idea of uses and gratifications – we may not all have the same potential to use and enjoy the media products that we want. In society there are in fact plenty of minorities who feel that the media does not provide for them the texts that they want to use.

TASK				
Fill in this chart for your own use of the media and compare it with others in the class. For the last column use the list of uses that I have given above.				
Programme	How often watched	Why watched	Do people I know watch it?	Type of use
News				
Neighbours				
Quiz				
Soap				
Adverts				

One of the difficulties of assessing uses and gratifications like this is that people won't often be aware of the real uses of a text in their lives – how many people would admit for example that they watched a certain program because they were lonely even if that were the truth

Reception analysis: Audience as *individuals*

In a sense, this is an extension of uses and gratifications theory. Once you have come up with the idea that people are using the media in different ways, it is just one stage on to actually look in more detail at how this happens. Reception analysis does this and it concentrates on the audience themselves and their reading of the text.

The most important thing about this that you should bear in mind is that reception analysis is based on the idea that no text has one simple meaning. Instead, reception analysis suggests that the *audience themselves* help to create the meaning of the text. We all decode the texts that we encounter in individual ways which may be a result of our upbringing, the mood that we are in, the place where we are at the time or in fact any combination of these and all kinds of other factors. So I may watch a television programme and enjoy every minute of it and you may hate the same show. But of course, it goes way beyond just how much we enjoy the text. We will actually create a different meaning for it as well.

Reception analysis is all about trying to look at these kinds of differences and to understand them. What reception analysts have found is that factors such as a gender, our place inside society, and the context of the time we are living in can be enormously important when we make the meaning of a text.

The best known theorist to tackle this line of thinking is David Morley. His 1980 study of audience responses to the BBC programme Nationwide was designed to analyse the different ways in which viewers interpreted media texts. He suggested that audiences tended to fall into three groups, based on their different readings of the text.

Preferred/dominant reading

The **preferred** reading is the reading media producers hope will take from the text. For example, an advertisement for a *McDonalds Big Mac* is intended to encourage feelings of hunger in the audience, and propensity to buy a McDonald's burger the next time they're passing. Assuming the majority of the audience respond by salivating and rubbing their tummies (!) this is also the **dominant** reading.

Oppositional reading

Audience members from outside the target audience may reject the preferred reading, receiving their own alternative message. The health-conscious, anti-globalisation campaigners and vegetarians will most likely respond to the McDonald's advert with frustration and annoyance.

Negotiated reading

The 'third way' is one in which audiences acknowledge the preferred reading, but modify it to suit their own values and opinions. A negotiated response to the McDonald's advert might be "I love Big Macs – but one a month as a treat is all my figure can stand."

Morley's view of dominant, negotiated and oppositional readings of texts is a semiological approach because it recognises the importance of the analysis of signs, particularly visual signs, that shape so much of modern media output. It ties to our understanding of *connotations*, studied as part of media language.

Take the example of a performance by the Pussycat Dolls on a Saturday morning TV show. A 12 year-old girl watching this may find it very meaningful for her personally – she may feel that their image has important things to say to her about how she might dress or behave. Her father, on the other hand, may create different meanings for the text – he may disapprove of their clothing, behaviour or lyrics, and so the same performance that the girl finds so inspiring may be disgusting to him.

Often when our views of the media differ, it can say as much about us as it does about the media text itself. In this example, the most important factor is probably how the



*Pussycat Dolls go BEEP: It **does** mean a thing – but exactly **what** may depend on the audience as much as their stylists.*

Pussycat Dolls trigger off in the two people's minds ideas that they have about their own lives. The girl may relate to the group because they are of the same gender as her and because, while they are not the same age as she is, they are probably more

like the age she would like to be. For the father, his views of the group are probably influenced by the fact that his daughter likes them so much – the idea that she might want to become like them, may make their performance seem more frightening.

Of course this kind of thing is often closer to psychology – the study of personality – than media studies and can be very difficult to research. While *quantitative* researchers simply count the number of people watching a programme, *reception analysts* have to make use of interviews in order to get some kind of idea of the meanings that people attach to texts. This can be very time-consuming – a simple questionnaire is rarely enough and often the researchers will have to ask quite detailed and spontaneous questions.

The ideas that reception theorists come up with are also not so neat and straightforward as those of other approaches. If you remember, Uses and Gratifications made up a simple list of four types of use for the media. Because reception theory concentrates on the individual it can never do this – we are all different and no one theory can comprehend that.

This can be seen as a strength of the theory – that it takes into account the complexity of our response to the media. At the same time the theory has a weakness which has been pointed out. This will be clearer if we return to our example of the Pussycat Dolls. The girl's reaction to the programme may also have been affected by the day that she had had at school – the way that her teacher shouted at her may have made her particularly excited about the idea of girl power. Similarly, an encounter with a strong woman who he was not keen on, may have affected the father's reactions to the programme. Reception analysis takes none of this into account it ignores the context of everyday life, something which we will turn to in the final theory concerning audiences.

Politics of the Living Room

Uses and gratifications theory looked at why we make use of the media, Reception analysis looked at what we see when we watch a media text – what both of them leave out is the question of how the media fits in with our everyday lives – how do we live with the media?

One researcher who has looked at this is David Morley. He has come up with the idea of the “politics of the living room” – the idea that the media is just part of all the different things that may be going on in your home, that a television can become more than just a form of entertainment but in a typical family can be a subject of argument or a symbol of power. This may be a concept that you will find quite familiar. Imagine a situation where a man comes home from a terrible day at work. He is in a bad mood and does not want to talk to anybody in his family so he switches on the TV. Anyone doing quantitative (numerical) research would simply see him as the another viewer of whatever programme is on but in fact he is probably barely watching it – the television is simply a way of shutting the rest of the world out. This is one simple example of the media in everyday life – here are some more general principles

We can never consider one example of the media on its own – we are always choosing from many different alternatives and more confusingly our understanding of one text may be affected by our knowledge of another – to go back to the earlier example the man watching the Pussycat Dolls may have read about them in that morning's Daily Mail.

It is very rare for us to concentrate fully on any media text – we may skim read through a magazine or glance at various different channels while using the remote. Once again, quantitative research cannot cope with this – it simply counts the number of texts encountered but doesn't consider whether the audience have taken them in.

The media can become an important part of the routines of our lives – you may want to watch Neighbours when you get in from school or listen to the Chart Show every Sunday when you do your homework. In these examples, the exact time and the way that the media

text fits in with the pattern of you day are almost as important as what the media text actually is.

It is very rare for us to be completely alone when we encounter a media text. If you think back to the mass audience theorists, they talked about the media audience being isolated like atoms, but in fact, even when you are reading a newspaper, you are often surrounded by other people – even when you are in your room watching the TV, your family are close at hand.

Gender differences

One interesting thing that Morley found in his research was that there were clear differences in the uses that people made of the media in their everyday lives depending on their gender. He found that men tended to prefer factual programmes e.g. News and sports while women preferred fiction Soaps and other drama series. Also, men preferred watching the programmes extensively while women tended to be doing something else at the same time. Another thing that he found was that if someone had control over what the family was watching, it was more likely to be the man – often with the remote control in his hand.

Of course, this does not necessarily mean that there are fundamental differences men and women. What it does relate to is the kinds of lives they are often leading – for a man, working during the day outside of the home, television is seen as a form of relaxation. For women, on the other hand, the home is often a place of work and so it is likely that that work will have to continue during the evening's television as well. Of course, the account I have given of typical lifestyles of men and women is now becoming quite out of date and so it is very likely that research such as Morley's, if carried out today, would come up with quite different conclusions. What do you think? How does it relate to your family?

TASK

In preparation for the kind of thinking you will have to do for that spend a bit of time considering here how Morley's ideas of gender differences in viewing patterns are reflected in your own families. You can include in the space below your own experiences and also anything that you find out of the opinions of others in your family through interviews.

Mode of address

Still in line with the active audience idea is the concept of *mode of address*. This refers to the way that a text speaks to us in a style that encourages us to identify with the text because it is 'our' kind of text. For example *Friends* is intended for a young audience because of the way it uses music and the opening credits to develop a sense of fun, energy and enthusiasm that the perceived audience can identify with. This does not mean that other groups are excluded, merely that the dominant mode of address is targeted at the young. Mode of address can even be applied to entire outputs, as in the case of Channel Four which works hard to form a style of address aimed at an audience which is informed, articulate and in some ways a specialised one. Newspapers, too, often construct their presentation to reflect what they imagine is the identity of their typical readers. Compare *The Sun* and *The Guardian* in this context.

Summing up

You have followed a number of different theories and it is now your job to decide what you think about them. It could be that you will come out on the side of the mass audience theorists and believe that the media affect us all in relatively predictable ways. On the other hand, if you end up finding that simplistic, you need to decide what you want to take from the theories of Uses and Gratifications, Reception Analysis and the Media in Everyday life. Remember, these approaches do not exclude each other – it is quite possible to take bits from each as long as you are clear in your mind (and in your essays) what you believe.

TASK

Choose from this list a research task that you think you will be able to follow successfully. In many cases you may want to change the text referred to to something more current or interesting.

- How much do audiences remember of adverts?
- How does a teenage audience use and perceive the Sun?
- Where do audiences get their ideas about style from?
- Why did audiences go to see Trainspotting?
- The viewing of horror and violence by children aged between 8-13.
- Attitudes towards violence on television.
- How important are film posters in determining what people go to see?
- What do audiences do while adverts are on television?
- Is there a demand for an indie music radio station?
- Football magazines – for men only?
- What do boys really think of Sugar magazine?