

Media Audiences

Is an audience active or passive?

Uses and Gratifications Theory

The idea that media audiences make *active* use of what the media offer.
The audience has a set of needs that the media in one form or another meets.

This theory was developed by *Blumler and Katz* in 1974.
They identified four broad viewers' needs that were fulfilled by television:

- DIVERSION
- PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP
- PERSONAL IDENTITY
- SURVEILLANCE

Uses and Gratifications Theory supposes an *active* audience providing its own interpretation of a text's meaning.

It assumes that media identifies the needs of the audience and produces texts to satisfy them but could it be that the audience creates the needs as a response to the material provided by the media? Do we, the audience, have other needs that are not provided for?

The Hypodermic Needle Theory

The theory that suggests that the media 'injects' ideas into a *passive* audience, like giving a patient a drug.

This was an early theory of mass media and mass audiences. It appeared to be true in the case of successful propaganda by the Nazis in 1930s Germany.

It assumes that a mass audience receives the same message from the texts they are exposed to. This was perhaps a natural assumption at the birth of mass media before we really understood or had studied the different ways in which people react to media texts.

It was suggested that commercial television (in particular) and popular cinema, moulded people into a standardised, passive state of being that allowed them to be easily manipulated.

Even now in today's more sophisticated and cynical society there have been cases where the media have manipulated and we still give perhaps too much authority and credence to the media.

Commercial TV's advertising is a case where it could be argued that – if it is successful – it has 'brainwashed' the audience into accepting information it perhaps otherwise wouldn't have wanted or believed.

How do we consume media?

Tunstall (1983) in *The Media in Britain* suggested that we consume the media on three levels.

- Primary Media

Where we pay close attention to the media text, for instance, close reading of a magazine or newspaper or watching a film in the cinema where we tend to concentrate on the film.

- Secondary Media

Where the text is there in the background and we are aware of it but not concentrating on it. Typically listening to the radio would fall into this category but some people use the TV in this way.

- Tertiary Media

Where the medium is present but we are not aware of it at all. Advertising hoardings and placards that do not register with us being a good example.

Comparing TV to the cinema we can immediately see that our use is different. TV is part of 'the flow' of media that we are exposed to. We can turn it on and off at will, like water.

We watch TV for different reasons and our reception of TV and media in general is, it has been suggested, related to our domestic or *situated culture*.

Essentially: *Who* we are – our sense of our own place in the world, our views and beliefs – and *where* we are – in terms of social location – influence our responses to the media.

Situated Culture

A term used to describe how our *situation* (i.e. daily routines and patterns, social relationships with family and peers) can influence our engagement with and interpretation of media texts.

Audience Participation

Real people are increasingly appearing on TV. Consider all the recent so called docu-soaps and 'reality television' like *Big Brother* and *Castaway*. Why is this?

Audience participation started in the 1950's with American quiz shows that were copied and rapidly became popular in this country – 'Take Your Pick', 'Double Your Money'. In the earlier shows (as in a few now like 'Family Fortunes') the ordinary participants were quite carefully controlled. One of the reasons for this control was the earlier limitation of the technology. Microphones and cameras were not as flexible and versatile as they are today but also appearance on TV was something that was the preserve of specialists and personalities who were experts in the field.

Today the public are increasingly the stars of the shows. This began perhaps with *You've been Framed* and has now reached ridiculous levels with shows like *Big Brother*.

So called *fly on the wall* documentaries, which began with Ken Loach's productions in the 70's have never lost their popularity, and have now become fully developed into docu-soaps like *Airport* and *Driving School*.

Modern technology, miniature cameras (Mini DV) and efficient and effective radio microphones – seen being worn by nearly every docu-soap character these days – have made this type of program making much easier. It can also be very cheap with no actors or star salaries to pay.

Why are these programmes so popular? Consider *Blumler & Katz's* research discussed above.

Gendered Consumption

Many people have researched how our gender affects our media consumption.

Hobson(1982) and Gray (1992) both suggested that women prefer ‘*open-ended*’ narratives like soap operas whereas men prefer ‘*closed*’ narratives like police dramas. Soap Operas also conform to certain common conventions associated with women’s fiction.

- They have strong female lead characters
- They focus on the private, domestic sphere
- They deal with personal relationships
- They contain an element of fantasy and/or escapism

The Utopian Solution

This term (from Dyer’s study in 1977) suggests that entertainment genres are popular because of their fantasy element and the escapism that they provide from routines and problems.

What women like

Early research suggested that women welcome romantic texts as a means of reasserting the positive aspects of their lives. Heroines are seen as victorious because they symbolise the values of the female world of love and human relationships as being more important than fame or material success. This is still true today but there have been cultural changes.

In modern texts – *Prime Suspect* and *Trial and Retribution* being recent examples of TV Drama and numerous Hollywood movies - the tough hero in non-romantic texts is often a woman though. This reflects new values in women’s thinking towards the end of the last century and now. Women can now readily identify with the professional work ethic where the woman leads and family values are secondary.

What men like

Research has suggested that males prefer factual programmes like news, documentary and current affairs. They may like soap operas but are not ready to admit it to researchers.

Mulvey (1975) suggests that most Hollywood films are based on the idea of a male viewer and are shot from a male point of view. The so-called ‘*maze gaze*’ which positions women as passive and as objects.

Above all it must be remembered that texts are *polysemic* (have more than one meaning) and can mean different things to different people. The audience is an important component of reaching that meaning.