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Cape Peninsula University of Technology
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Eunice Ivala

ABSTRACT

This article argues that early television audience research (using the normative paradigm) did not give a clear understanding of the complexities of television and its audiences and suggests that audience research based on an active audience paradigm is the key to understanding television and its audiences. In this regard, this article argues for the use of ethnographic analysis of audience reception and a mixed method approach to audience research.

Key words: encoding/decoding; ethnographic analysis of audience reception ethno-methodology; interpretative paradigm; hypodermic model; normative paradigm; ratings; sign; television audience research; uses and gratifications model; zapping and zipping

1 INTRODUCTION

Early audience research into television was undertaken within the empirical framework, which conceptualised the audience as a large mass composed of isolated and unknown individuals. This normative paradigm is often referred to as the 'hypodermic model' (Barker, 1997; Morley, 1992), and has been the subject of considerable criticism. Firstly, the model concentrates on short-term behaviour rather than considering the meaning that audiences construct and deploy. Secondly, it fails to differentiate between social groups and the meanings they bring to television consumption. As Williams (1961) remarked, 'there are no masses, only ways of seeing people as masses'. Above all, the model failed to demonstrate the expected effects of television (Barker, 1997). Stuart Hall (1982, 61) pointed out that 'effects studies' confined themselves to immediately observable changes in human behaviour and left the formal structure of media output wholly untheorised. They were also unable to deal with the wider affectivity of economic and cultural processes (Moores, 1995, 5).

The article is based on a literature review that has been conducted locally and internationally on audience research. Methods employed to track down literature are the following: an extensive search of the World Wide Web; and a systematic following up of key research texts related to audience research. In this overall search, relevant information was gathered from various sources such as Web documents, journal articles, books, master's and doctoral theses and library databases.

Eunice Ivala is a project manager at the Media in Education Trust. E-mail: eunice@miet.co.za

2 QUANTITATIVE APPROACHES TO TELEVISION AUDIENCE RESEARCH

Ratings

Despite the criticisms levelled at the normative paradigm, there remains a significant attachment amongst some television researchers to a numerical approach. Thus 'ratings', so important to television organisations in their quest to measure and control audiences and attract advertising revenue, are constructed using a mixture of surveys, diaries and electronic 'people-meters' to give increasingly sophisticated mathematical representations of audience behaviour. These represent the efforts made by advertisers and programme producers to track and shape the audience as part of an ongoing form of surveillance (Barker, 1997). Ratings is an entrenched research practice based upon the assumption that it is possible to determine the objective size of the 'television audience'. It is grounded upon a straightforward behaviourist epistemology. Audience ratings tell how many viewers were exposed to specific programme content on particular TV channels in certain time slots. The measure of exposure is often assumed to indicate an act of choice in which an individual selects from a range of available programming (Webster and Wagschlag, 1985). Less modestly interpreted, exposure is assumed to imply attention to television, programme preference or acceptance and even an effect on the viewer. Quite often the ratings serve as the prime criterion of TV advertising effect (Schulz, 2000, 115).

If a programme has high ratings it is assumed to have met the viewers' needs and interests, which is one criterion of responsiveness and accountability of a television channel (Mitchell and Blumler, 1994). More often, high ratings are regarded as an indication of economic success, particularly from the standpoint of a commercial channel which is catering for a specific segment of the audience market (Schulz, 2000). In ratings, 'watching television' is defined implicitly as a simple, one-dimensional and purely objective and isolatable act. As Todd Gitlin has rightly remarked in relation to the electronic set meter, 'the numbers only sample sets tuned in, not necessarily shows watched, let alone grasped, remembered, loved, learned from, deeply anticipated, or mildly tolerated'(1983, 54; see also Eco, 1993, 99; Hagen, 1999, 142; Hôijer, 1999, 180; Morley, 1990, 6–7). More generally, the statistical perspective of audience measurement inevitably leads to emphasising averages, regularities and generalisable patterns rather than particularities, idiosyncrasies and surprising exceptions. What all this amounts to is the construction of a kind of streamlined map of the 'television audience', on which individual viewers are readable in terms of their resemblance to a 'typical' consumer whose 'viewing behaviour' can be objectively and unambiguously classified.

Recent changes in the structure of television provision as a result of the introduction of new television technologies such as cable, satellite and the video cassette recorder (VCR), have thrown this assumption of measurability of the television audience into severe crisis. The problem is both structural and cultural. It is related to the fact that 'watching television' is generally domestic consumer practice, and as such not at all the one-

dimensional, and therefore measurable type of behaviour it hitherto has been presumed. For example, the proliferation of channels has dramatised acutely the problems inherent in the diary technique of audience measurement. Suddenly the built-in subjective (and thus unreliable) element of the diary technique was perceived as an unacceptable deficiency. David Poltrack, vice president of research for CBS, one of the three major US networks, voiced the problem as follows:

> It used to be easy. You watched *MASH* on Monday night and you'd put that in the diary. Now, if you have thirty channels on cable you watch one channel, switch to a movie, watch a little MTV, then another programme, and next morning with all that switching all over the place you can't remember what you watched (quoted in Bedell Smith, 1985 cited in Ang, 1991).

Generally, agreement grew within the industry that possibilities of 'channel switching and zapping' (swiftly 'grazing' through different channels by using the remote control devices) had made the diary an obsolete measurement tool. The videocassette recorder has also played a major destabilising role in the measurability of the television audience. 'Time shifting' and 'zipping' (fast-forwarding commercials when playing back a taped programme) threatened to deregulate the carefully composed television schedules of the networks. This phenomenon has come to be called schedule cannibalization (Rosenthal, 1987), a voracious metaphor that furtively indicates the apprehension, if not the implicit regret, felt in network circles about the new freedoms viewers have acquired through the VCR. 'Zipping', 'zapping', 'time shifting' and so on, are only the most obvious and most recognised tactical manoeuvres viewers engage in in order to construct their own television experience. There are many other ways of doing so, ranging from doing other things while watching to churning out cynical comments on what's on the screen (Gunter and Svennevig, 1987; Morley, 1990, 7; Taylor and Mullan, 1986).

As a result, it can no longer be conveniently assumed, as has been the foundational logic and the strategic pragmatics of traditional audience measurement, that having the television on equals watching; that watching means paying attention to the screen; that watching a programme implies watching the commercials inserted in it; and that watching the commercials leads to actually buying the products being advertised. It is important to note that no matter how sophisticated the measurement technology, television consumption can never be completely 'domesticated' in the classificatory grid of ratings research. This is because television consumption is, despite its habitual character, dynamic rather than static, experiential rather than merely behavioural. It is a complex practice that is more than just an activity that can be broken down into simple and objectively measurable variables. It is full of casual, unforeseen and indeterminate moments which inevitably make for the ultimate unmeasurability of how television is used in the context of everyday life (Morley, 1990).

In the face of growing demand for more accurate and more detailed information about television consumption, technological innovations in audience measurement procedures

are still stubbornly seen as the best hope to get more accurate information about television consumption. Nevertheless, the tremendous excitement about the prospect of having such single-source, multi-variable information, which is typically celebrated by researchers as an opportunity of 'recapturing . . . intimacy with the consumer' (Gold, 1986, 24) or getting in touch with 'real persons' (Davis, 1986, 51), indicates the increasing discontent with ordinary ratings statistics alone as signifiers for the value of the audience commodity.

Statistical figures that estimate audience size suggest the ultimate possibility of defining the television audience as a unified totality. This kind of empirical audience measurement (favoured by television institutions) which defines the television audiences as individual persons and disregards the diverse social and cultural contexts in which viewing occurs is an effort to stabilise 'the television audience' which is made up of inherently unstable identities, as Ien Ang points out in the following:

> The identities of actual audiences are inherently unstable, they are dynamic and variable formations of people whose cultural and psychological boundaries are essentially uncertain. The social world of actual audiences is therefore a fundamentally fluid, fuzzy and elusive reality, whose description can never be contained and exhausted by any totalising definition of 'television audiences' . . . institutionally produced discursive constructions of 'television audience' are strategic structurations of which are under constant pressure of reconstruction whenever they turn out to be imperfect weapons in the quest for control (Ang, 1991, 41; see also Ang, 1990; Morley, 1992).

According to John Fiske, 'people watching television are best modelled according to a multitude of differences' (Fiske, 1994). The kind of quantitative statistical data gathered by television institutions does not account for differences or individuality among television viewers. More emphasis is needed on context of viewing and on television as an aspect of a whole range of everyday practices (Scannel, 1988).

Social Survey

Another common method of quantitative audience research is the social survey. As with survey techniques more generally, statistical tabulations can tell us about who has bought what, not what meanings those products have for those buying them, nor how those products are used in the practice of everyday life. While far from useless, the survey can only paint a static quantitative picture of who consumes what; it cannot offer a vibrant, qualitative picture of how something is consumed and what meanings are produced through those processes of consumption. As the cultural theorist Michel de Certeau argued, the survey approach utilised by producers can only count 'what is used', not the ways of using. Paradoxically, the latter becomes invisible in the universe of codification (De Certeau, 1984, 35).

Although survey work is useful in that it provides an excellent skeleton, so to speak, on which to build further research, it lacks flesh and blood (Gillespie, 1995, 52). Marie

Gillespie explains why the social survey method of audience research has declined in popularity:

> In recent years, the survey method has been most unfashionable among academic audience researchers who have generally expressed increasing preference for the use of qualitative method. It is dismissed as positivist, empiricist and lacking in explanatory power. It is also criticised for being unable to address questions of 'meaning'. Since the researcher is unable to tap into the subjective meanings held individually or collectively, it is argued that the questionnaire is not understood and answered by everyone in the same way, that it is a rigid and closed method of data collection (Gillespie, 1995, 52–53).

Gillespie is of the opinion 'that quantitative survey methods are ideally suited to the purpose of establishing broad patterns of media consumption and taste, if used in conjunction with more qualitative methods'(Gillespie, 1995, 52). The social survey 'counts people as units' which can be measured 'not as integral parts of and agents of systems and relationships' (Gillespie, 1995, 52). In other words, they do not provide the full ethnographic picture. Gillespie points out that although the survey can hardly deal with the complexity of social processes, and is limited by the kind of information it can extract, many of its inherent flaws can be overcome when it is combined with qualitative methods (see Gillespie, 1995).

An enormous number of quantitative studies has been produced in recent years, based on the simplistic notion of the effects of television on its viewers and on the 'uses and gratifications' approach. These studies are 'insistent on proving the researcher's neutrality and objectivity, but they have proven quite inadequate to the task of understanding television viewing'(Seiter *et al.*, 1994, 2), as they disregard the social contexts of viewing (Ang, 1991; Morley, 1992) in their pursuit of positivist social science. 'As ways of comprehending the lived experiences of actual audiences, these methods would be doomed to failure' (Moore, 1995, 3).

3 THE INTERPRETATIVE PARADIGM

A revised sociological perspective (the interpretative paradigm) has made inroads into communication research. The interpretative paradigm puts into question what had always been assumed to be shared and stable systems of values among all the members of the society being researched, by asserting that the meaning of a particular action cannot be taken for granted, but must be viewed in the context of the actors involved. Interaction was thus conceptualised as a process of interpretation and of mutual typification by, and of, the actors involved in a given situation. It emphasised the role of language and symbols, everyday communication, the interpretation of action, and the process of 'making sense' in interaction (Morley, 1992, 51). Whereas the normative approach had focused exclusively on individual actions as the reproduction of shared stable norms, the interpretative model, in its ethno-methodological form, conceived each interaction as the

'production' of a new reality. The problem here was often that although ethnomethodology could shed an interesting light on microprocesses of interpersonal communications, this was disconnected from any notion of institutional power or structural relations of class and politics (Morley, 1992, 51).

Aspects of the interactionist perspective were later taken over by the Centre for Mass Communication Research at Leicester University, and the terms in which its then director, James Halloran, discussed the social effects of television gave some idea of its distance from the normative paradigm. He spoke of the

> Trend away from . . .the emphasis on the viewer as *tabularasa* . . . just waiting to soak up all that is beamed at him. Now we think in terms of interaction or exchange between the medium and audience, and it is recognised that the viewer approaches every viewing situation with a complicated piece of filtering equipment (Halloran, 1970a, 20).

The empirical work of the Leicester Centre at this time marked an important shift in research from behavioural analysis to cognitive analysis (Morley, 1992). The realisation spawned by mass-media research that one cannot approach the problems of 'effects' of the media on the audience as if contents impinged directly on passive minds, but that people in fact assimilate, select from and reject communications from the media, led to the development of the 'uses and gratifications model' (Morley, 1992, 51).

Uses and gratifications model

The 'uses and gratification model' was developed by Blumler and Katz (1975 quoted in de Beer, 1998). It has its origins in psychology, specifically analysis of human motivation. This model suggests that viewers, listeners and readers actively use mass communication along with other sources in their community to gratify particular needs and reach their goals (see also Davidson and Yu, 1974, 15; Severin and Tankard, 1992, 269). According to this approach, the following assumptions are made about the media and media users: members of the audience actively link themselves to certain media to satisfy specific goals and to gain gratification. Thus, the use of the media is goal directed; the media compete with other resources of information and entertainment in order to satisfy the needs of the audience; audiences are able to alter the media in such a way that their needs are more easily met; and audiences are also aware of their needs and can therefore offer specific reasons for using a particular medium. The following four main kinds of needs can be identified: diversion (escape from routine and the burdens of day-to-day problems, relaxation, fantasy and imagination); personal relationships (companionship and mediated social contacts); personal identity (personal references, values, exploration of reality, role models); and surveillance (need for information, keep up to date, provision of subjects for conversation) (de Beer, 1998, 21).

The ‘uses and gratifications’ approach highlights the important fact that different members of the mass-media audience may use and interpret any particular programme in quite different ways from how the communicator intended it, and in quite different ways from other members of the audience. Rightly, it stresses the role of the audience in the construction of meaning (Morley, 1992, 51–52). However, this ‘uses and gratifications model’ suffers from fundamental defects in at least two respects.

Firstly, as Stuart Hall (1973a) argues, it falls short in terms of its overestimation of ‘openness’ of the message. Polysemy must not be confused with pluralism. Any society/culture tends, with varying degrees of closure, to impose its segmentation and its classifications of the world upon its members. This remains a dominant cultural order, though it is neither unvocal nor uncontested (Hall, 1973a, 13; Moores, 1995, 7). While messages can potentially sustain more than one reading, ‘there can be no law to ensure that the receiver will ‘‘take’’ the preferred or dominant reading of an episode . . .in precisely the way in which it has been encoded by the producer’ (Hall, 1973a). As Phillip Elliot rightly argues, one fundamental flaw in the ‘uses and gratifications’ approach is that it fails to take into account the fact that television consumption is

> More a matter of availability than of selection . . . (in this sense) availability depends on familiarity . . . that audience has easier access to familiar genres partly because they understand the language and conventions and also because they already know the social meaning of this type of output with some certainty (Elliot, 1973, 21).

Similarly, John Downing has pointed to the limitations of the assumption of an unstructured mass of ‘differential interpretations’ of media messages. As he points out, while in principle a given ‘content’ may be interpreted by the audience in a variety of ways,

> In practice very few of these views will be distributed throughout the vast majority of the population, with the remainder to be found only in a small minority. [For] given a set of cultural norms and values which are very dominant in the society as a whole (say the general undesirability of strikes) and given certain stereotypes (say that workers and /or unions initiate strikes) only a very sustained and carefully argued and documented presentation of any given strike is likely to challenge these values and norms (Downing, 1974, 111 quoted in Morley, 1992, 52–52).

The second limitation of the ‘uses and gratifications’ perspective lies in its insufficiently sociological psychologistic problematic, relying as it does on mental states, needs and processes abstracted from the social situation of the individuals concerned. In this sense the ‘modern’ ‘uses and gratifications’ approach is less ‘sociological’ than earlier attempts to apply this framework in the USA. The earlier studies dealt with specific types of content and audiences, while ‘modern’ ‘uses and gratifications’ tend to look for underlying structures of need and gratification of psychological origin, without effectively

situating these within any socio-historical framework (Moores, 1995, 7; Morley, 1992; Morley, 1994, 17). As Phillip Elliot argues, the 'intra-individual' processes with which uses and gratification research deals, can be generalised to aggregates of individuals, but they cannot be converted in any meaningful way into social structures and processes (Elliot, 1973, 6). This is because the audience here is still conceived of as an atomised mass of individuals (just as in the earlier 'stimulus-response' model), abstracted from the groups and subcultures which provide a framework of meaning for their activities. The above point argues for the essentially social nature of consciousness as it is formed through language in much the way that Valentin Voloshinov does:

> Signs emerge after all, only in the process of interaction between one individual consciousness and another. And the individual consciousness itself is filled with signs. Consciousness becomes consciousness only once it has been filled with ideological (semiotic) content, consequently only in the process of social interaction (quoted in Woolfson, 1976, 168).

As Charles Woolfson remarks, the sign is construed here as a vehicle of social communication, and as permeating the individual consciousness, so that consciousness is seen as a socio-ideological fact. Thus, utterances are to be examined not as individual, idiosyncratic expressions of a psychological kind, but as sociologically regulated, both by the immediate social situation and by the surrounding socio-historical context; utterances form a 'ceaseless stream of dialogic inter-change (which is the) generative process of a given social collective' (Woolfson, 1976, 172). Woolfson argues for the need to redefine the analysis of individuals' speech utterances as the analysis of the communicative utterances of 'social individuals'. One needs to break fundamentally with the 'uses and gratifications' approach, its psychologistic problematic and its emphasis on individual differences of interpretation. Of course, there will always be individual, private readings, but one needs to investigate the extent to which these individual readings are patterned into cultural structures and clusters (Morley, 1992).

David Morley (1992, 80) argued that it is not only a question of the different psychologies of individuals, but also a question of differences between individuals involved in different subcultures, with different socio-economic backgrounds. That is to say, while of course there will always be individual differences in how people interpret a particular message, those individual differences might well turn out to be framed by cultural differences. Murdock makes this point well:

> In order to provide anything like a satisfactory account of the relationship between people's mass media involvement and their own social situation and meaning system, it is necessary to start from the social setting rather than from the individual; to replace the idea of personal 'needs' with the notion of structural contradictions; and to introduce the concept of sub-cultures. Sub-cultures are the meaning system and modes of expression developed by groups in particular parts of the social structure in the course of the collective attempt to come to terms with the contradictions in their shared social situations; more particularly, sub-cultures represent

> the accumulated meanings and means of expression through which groups in subordinate structural positions have attempted to negotiate or oppose the dominant meaning system. Therefore, provide a pool of available symbolic resources which particular individuals or groups can draw on in their attempt to make sense of their own specific situation and construct a viable identity (Murdock, 1973, 213–14 quoted in Morley, 1992, 81).

What is needed for audience research is an approach which links differential interpretations back to the socio-economic structure of society, showing how members of different groups and classes, sharing different 'cultural codes' will interpret a given message differently, not just at the personal, idiosyncratic level, but in a way systematically related to their socio-economic position. The audience must be conceived of as being composed of clusters of socially situated individual readers, whose individual readings will be framed by shared cultural formations and practices pre-existent to individual, shared cultural 'orientations' which will in turn be determined by factors derived from the objective position of the individual reader in the class structure. These objective factors must be seen as setting parameters to individual experience because although they do not 'determine' consciousness in a mechanistic way, people understand their situation and react to it within the context of their subcultures and meaning systems (Morley, 1992, 54).

Encoding/decoding model

A different theoretical account of the 'active' audience can be found within 'cultural studies', most obviously within the encoding/decoding model developed by Stuart Hall (1981). Hall perceives the process of television encoding as an articulation of linked but distinct moments: production, circulation, distribution, which has its specific practice which is necessary to the circuit but does not guarantee the next moment. In particular, the production of meaning does not ensure consumption of that meaning as the encoders might have intended because television messages constructed as a sign system with multi-accentuated components are polysemic. In short, television messages carry multiple meanings and can be interpreted in different ways. That is not to say that all the meanings are equal among themselves. Rather the text will be 'structured in dominance' leading to a 'preferred meaning'. The audience is conceived of as composed of clusters of socially-situated individuals whose readings will be framed by shared cultural meanings and practices, and to the degree that these frameworks are also those of the encoders, the audience will decode the messages within the same frameworks (Barker, 1997).

The encoding/decoding model stresses the audience's potential to respond actively and even argumentatively to the messages of the media. Because all audiences bring to their viewing those other discourses and sets of representations with which they are in contact in other areas of their lives, the messages that they receive from the media do not confront them in isolation. Audiences intersect with explicit and implicit messages they have

received from other institutions, people they know, or sources of information they trust. Unconsciously, audiences sift and compare messages from one place with those received from another. Thus, how audiences respond to messages from the media depends precisely on the extent to which they fit with, or possibly contradict that which they have come across in other areas of their lives (Morley, 1992, 76–77). A different way of looking at how audiences interact with messages is provided by Hall, after Frank Parkin (1971), as a model of three hypothetical decoding positions: a dominant-hegemonic encoding/decoding, a negotiated code (which acknowledges the legitimacy of the hegemonic in the abstract but makes its own rules and adaptations under particular circumstances) and an oppositional code in which people may understand the preferred encoding but reject it and decode in contrary ways (Barker, 1997, 117). The meaning or 'reading' of the programme generated by the viewer then depends both on how the programme has been structured by the broadcasters and on what codes of interpretation the viewer brings with him or her to the text.

It was against the background of the 'effects theory' and the 'uses and gratifications' paradigm that Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model of communication was developed as an attempt to develop insights which had come out of other perspectives (see Morley, 1994). Hall's model challenged the idea that it is possible to determine the nature of communication and meaning by the application of measurement techniques. It insisted that meaning is multilayered/multireferential and as such imports the then new fields of semiotics and structuralism into the study of mass communication (Gray, 1999, 27). Hall's model offered a way beyond the current 'uses and gratifications' approach by insisting that audiences share certain frameworks of understanding and interpretation. Reading is not simply for the lonely uses and gratifications of individual, it is shared (Gray, 1999).

The encoding/decoding model suggested by Hall created a series of empirical studies about the reception of television programmes by different audiences. The first study was David Morley's *The Nationwide audience* (1980a), which brought together the 'constructed text' (Brunsdon and Morley, 1978), with its perceived preferred reading, and the 'interpreting groups of readers' with their 'determinations'. The nationwide study sought to combine textual construction and interpretation, granted viewers interpretive status (but always within shaping structural determinations) and developed ways of conceiving of the audience as socially structured, suggesting that decoding is not homogeneous. Thus, the text and audience are conceptualised within and as part of the social structure organised in and across power relations of dominant and subordinate groups, of which media were seen to be occupying a crucial position and role.

Although the viewer was considered to be interpreting specific programmes in different ways, these were not entirely and absolutely open to the viewers. She or he was limited, shaped, by her or his own social positioning as well as the limitations and closures of the text itself (Gray, 1999, 27–28). The encoding/decoding model, although it examines the

social and cultural context of the audience, remains a limited model in the sense that 'it simply provides for the logical possibilities of the receiver either sharing the codes in which the message is sent and therefore, to that extent, being likely to make a dominant, negotiated or oppositional decoding of the encoded message' (Alasuutari, 1999; Morley, 1994, 18). There was limited value in inquiring how viewing groups selected by the researcher decoded a television programme without first establishing whether those people would usually be watching at all. A sense of the social patterning of tastes and preferences was required. The other important shortcoming of Morley's study was its failure to deal with the social settings in which consumption normally takes place: the immediate physical and interpersonal contexts of daily media reception. In the case of television, entry into the domestic realm of family viewing was needed if one is to see how contexts shape interpretations and choices (Morley, 1990, 7).

In summary, there has been a resurgence of interest in audience research since 1980, driven by the active audience paradigm, and although there are theoretical differences between writers in the field, discernible trends can be identified: from a concern with the general to an interest in the particular; from a concern with numbers to a concern with meaning; from viewing the text as having a single meaning to seeing multiple meanings in it; from concentration on the text to a focus on the audience; from seeing the audience as an undifferentiated broad mass to trying to understand the specifities of particular audiences under definite circumstances; and from a conception of the audience as passive to a notion of the active audience. These are the general theoretical stances of the active audience paradigm (Barker, 1997, 118).

The most recent development in audience research is the notion of ethnographic analysis of audience reception, which employs ethnographic methodologies. In their qualitative investigation of the television audience, 'traditional models of research have failed to approximate the lived experiences of audiences and to deliver the kinds of insights required to understand the complexities of television and its audiences embedded in wide social, political and economic contexts' (Gillespie, 1995, 53–54). Ethnography has been appropriated by audience researchers from anthropology, and it has been 'championed as a research practice capable of overcoming the impasse of many audience studies' (Gillespie, 1995, 54). It should be understood that ethnographies cannot magically give us direct and unmediated access to the real, which the ratings discourse cannot, as ethnographies are discourses too. What they do have, however, is a greater potential for engaging with the production of meaning in everyday life (see Moores, 1995). Therefore, it is this approach to audience research which this article recommends for television audience research.

Ethnographic analysis of audience reception

Ethnographic audience research has its roots in the influential work of Stuart Hall and his colleagues at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (Clark, 2000)

and owes much to the research of David Morley and Michel de Certeau's theorising on the practices of everyday life. British scholar James Curran, in an article published in the *European Journal of Communication* (1990), calls it a 'new revisionist movement', which is actually a reversion to previous liberal pluralist thinking. The charge is that the new revisionists fail to come to terms with the ideological power and influence of mass media, reject neo-Marxist explanatory frameworks, and reconceptualise the audience as creative and active. Therefore, ethnographic audience research is constructed on the basis that audiences are different, active and selective, but also influenced by social, cultural and economic factors within their environment. It offers a means of gaining greater insight into the way people watch what they do, and why. Unlike quantitative audience research, it acts as a method of cultural investigation, as it takes into account the social world of actual audiences (see Moores, 1995, 3). It assumes audiences use and interact with television and other popular forms of entertainment in a variety of ways, depending on intercultural, social, class, race and age variables (Brown, 1994, 73; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1993, 125). The aim of ethnographic audience studies is to 'examine the dynamics of action and constraint in the daily activities and practices of individuals and groups who are engaged in the socially situated production and consumption of meaning' (Morley, 1992, 183). Ethnographic audience studies 'acknowledges the differences between people despite their social construction, and pluralises the meanings and pleasures that they find in television. It thus contradicts theories that stress the singularity of television's meanings and its readings' (Fiske, 1994, 63).

Essentially, ethnographic audience research is qualitative and uses qualitative empirical methods. This type of qualitative empirical research is now recognised by many as one of the most adequate ways of learning about the differentiated subtleties of people's engagements with television and other media (see Ang, 1994). Drawing on perspectives developed by anthropologists such as Malinowski, audience ethnographies aim to produce deep, rich, and 'thick' descriptions of how people relate to the media in their day-to-day lives. Combining intensive observational field work with in-depth interviews and focus groups or group discussions, ethnographies present 'audiencehood' through the eyes of the research participants, as far as possible without reproducing a 'colonial gaze' (Young, 1996). The aim is to locate patterns and the 'informal logic of everyday life' (Geertz, 1973) but not to impose predetermined categories. Ethnographers are thus often more concerned about internal validity and situated representativeness than statistical significance. Where surveys segregate and decontextualise individual acts, the ethnographic approach insists that being an audience should not be abstracted from its social context (Kitzinger, 2004).

Ethnographic approaches have been fruitfully employed to explore communities of romance readers (Radway, 1984), how women find pleasure and develop different interpretations while watching soap operas (Hobson, 1982; Ang, 1985), how media technologies are integrated into the home (eg Lull, 1990; Morley and Silverstone, 1990),

and how diasporic communities use television and video to recreate cultural change (Gillespies, 1995). Other studies in this respect are David Morley's (1986) *Family Television*, James Lull's (1991) *Inside Family Viewing*, Ann Gray's (1992) *Video Playtime*, Roger Silverstone's (1994) *Television and Everyday Life*, and, from a historical perspective, Lynn Spigel's (1992) *Make Room for Television*. To these international studies can be added studies carried out by the researcher's colleagues at the Graduate Programme in Culture, Communication and Media Studies, University of Natal, Durban (now University of KwaZulu-Natal), South Africa. This includes the works of Michelle Tager (1995) on *The Bold and the Beautiful*; Tager (2002) on *The Bold and Beautiful* and *Generations: A comparative ethnographic audience study of Zulu-speaking students living in residences on the University of Natal's Durban campus*; and the work of Dorothy Roome (1997) on Transformation and Reconciliation: 'Simunye', a Flexible Model; and Roome (1998) on *Humour as 'Cultural Reconciliation' in South African Situation Comedy: An Ethnographic Study of Multicultural Female Viewers*.

However, this methodology is criticised on the following points: its stress on small and less representative sample sizes, making studies rarely generalisable to the population (Clarke, 2000); the tendency to overlook the variety of multiple social settings and ways in which households are differentially structured, which in turn leads to differential configurations of interactional dynamics, and which in turn lead to differential patterns of media usage and differential outcomes of the media reception experience; it is time-consuming and expensive and often requires long-term commitment (Seiter, 1999); and, in practice, some of the so-called 'audience ethnographies' fail to deliver either the intensity of involvement or the depth of analysis and reflexivity required to live up to the anthropological heritage of this term (see Nightingale, 1989). Despite these challenges and limitations, it needs to be acknowledged that each and every active pursuit of active viewers can only contribute greatly to our understanding of audiences. As Ang (1991, 14) points out, 'the world of actual audiences is too polysemic and polymorphic to be completely articulated in a closed discursive structure'. Schroder (1994, 341) agrees yet declares:

> But then let's get on with it and produce incompletely articulated accounts of audience readings and practices which may, in spite of their multiple shortcomings, provide illuminating insights into the polysemic and polymorphic relationships between media and people in the world we live in.

4 CONCLUSION

To conclude, this article advocates ethnographic analysis of audience reception because only a perspective that displays sensitivity to the everyday practices and experiences of actual audiences can supply any true insight into television viewers (Ang, 1991). However, an even better approach to audience research would be the combination of the ratings, surveys (quantitative methods) and ethnographic audience research, as the

inherent flaws in each methodology can be overcome by combining these methodologies. This is because quantitative data provides reinforcement to qualitative results focused upon a limited number of interpretative positions to the possible neglect of others.

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