



HE7601  
.S46

1988 h

COMMUNICATIONS  
FORUM

DEWEY

BEYOND THE MASS AUDIENCE

September 29, 1988

Seminar Notes

MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY  
COMMUNICATIONS FORUM

BEYOND THE MASS AUDIENCE

September 29, 1988

Seminar Notes

Robert C. Allen  
University of North Carolina

Elizabeth Long  
Rice University

Ellen Wartella  
University of Illinois

David Thorburn, Moderator  
Literature Dept., MIT

Gail Kosloff, Student Rapporteur  
MIT

MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

COMMUNICATIONS FORUM

The speakers participating in this session each challenged the traditional view of "audience research" which characterizes media users as members of a monolithic, passive and easily manipulated mass audience. The three scholars described some of their own theories and empirical research to support what they view as the preferred new interdisciplinary nature of today's audience research.

The first speaker, Robert Allen of the University of North Carolina, has extensively researched the areas of vaudeville in film and TV soap opera programming. Prof. Allen provided the audience with an historical overview of the development of "traditional" audience research in the broadcasting arena. According to Allen, the study of these audiences has been an integral part of mass communication scholarship in the United States for a half century. This traditional brand of audience research has been characterized by "counting viewers and listeners, describing their demographics, assessing their preferences, and measuring individuals responses behaviorally, attitudinally, and neurologically." Allen believes the "new" audience research stems from the reality that "after fifty years of study, media scholars still do not have accounts of people's relationships with television that do justice to the complexity, scope, variety, and dynamism of this phenomenon."

Allen admitted that along with other scholars he has long felt "the field of media studies was in crisis." Prof. Allen noted that many were questioning what the field was all about; the Journal of Communications (Summer 1983) referred to this confusion as the "ferment in the field" of communications. Allen remarked that since so much of this new audience research has been conducted around the audiences of television serial narratives (soap operas) he has had a chance to compare it to his own research.

Allen focused his talk on how this new audience research work "is leading to a reconceptualization of our engagement with television and how this might in turn lead to a restructuring of academic media studies in the U.S." Prof. Allen remarked that since so much work in this arena of new audience research is being done outside the U.S. it is difficult for U.S. media

MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

COMMUNICATIONS FORUM

scholars to track this area. According to Allen the most noteworthy scholars working abroad include: David Morley, Charlotte Brunson, Dorothy Hobson, David Buckingham, and Ann Grey in the U.K.; Ien Ang in Holland; Herman Baussinger in West Germany; John Tulloch and Albert Moran in Australia, along with other scholars in Italy, India, and Brazil.

Allen characterized this new audience research as "intervening at the point that the dominant paradigm is weakest and addressing problems that paradigm has the most difficulty accounting for: namely, the phenomenology of our everyday engagements with television." Allen suggest that the term "watching" television tends to oversimplify the variety of activities with which people are actually involved.

Prof. Allen noted that traditional audience research in the U.S. has focused on demographic measurement of audiences for commercial TV and radio. Most of this research has been proprietary work done for broadcasters and advertisers by companies such as A.C. Nielsen, Arbitron, etc. He acknowledges that this type of research is necessary to support the economic nature of today's broadcasting system. He pointed out that in contrast, the academic community has focused its research on media effects asking questions like: Does exposure to television violence cause aggressive behavior in children? What Allen finds missing in this research is "mapping out the enormous range of modes of engagement" people have with television.

Allen noted that rating systems of television have often overstated people's use of television since an activated TV does not necessarily mean someone is watching. He alluded to the "common-sensical" research being done by Peter Collett at Oxford. Collett's research involved connecting a videotape recorder to a TV so someone turning on a TV set would activate the recording of a program and the person observing the program. This new audience research is concerned with behavior among family members when they are sitting in front of the TV, e.g., where does the remote control device reside and who is authorized to use it.

According to Allen, while the old audience research attempts to quantify people's relationships with TV, the new audience research, "sees people's relationships with TV as a fundamentally open system phenomenon that inherently resists explanation in

MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

COMMUNICATIONS FORUM

terms of correlation coefficients." Thus this new audience research really concentrates on people's ties to television, and at the same time their relationships with each other. He points to researchers like David Morley who believe that TV studies should really be a subfield of family studies. Other researchers have focused on the gendered nature of people's engagement with television, e.g., Ann Grey's work on the introduction of the VCR into working-class families in Leeds which showed that VCR's were viewed as "daddy's technological toy."

Allen noted that it is often amazing the range of interpretation viewers may have of one program. Allen referred to Hodge and Tripp's research on Australian adolescents that revealed that the girls liked a soap opera series about a woman's prison in Australia because it paralleled their subordinate roles within the school system.

Over and over, Allen reiterated that people "engage" with television and do not simply "watch" it. He believes that our experience with television is not restricted to when the TV is turned on; the whole "engagement" process is more involved than that. He noted that Dorothy Hobson's study of women office workers in Birmingham revealed that women perhaps receive more pleasure from "reworking" the soap opera they watch in subsequent discussion than watching an actual episode.

Allen described TV and Hollywood films as two different viewing experiences given the differences in how these media "engage" the viewer. He characterizes our viewing of films as "centripetal" (drawing us to a single bright spot in the room while we all remain unseen viewers), in contrast to the television watching experience which is "centrifugal" (the TV beams its sounds and images at us to absorb us into the media at one point and then "kick us out" at another point when ads and storyline remind us we need to go to the grocery store, etc.). Allen alluded to the forms of TV programming that most directly acknowledge and address the viewing audience: the commercial, the talk show, the game show, sports, news.

Prof. Allen explained that this new audience research strives to understand the technological and economic issues related to television. In this vein, he acknowledges the importance of studying how devices like the remote control and

MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

COMMUNICATIONS FORUM

the VCR have changed the process of viewing TV. He believes the new audience research is sharply different from "mainstream" audience research in that the new model recognizes that there is not a singular viewing audience in the same way that people are "members of a tribe or Masonic Lodge, or even subscribers to a magazine."

Allen made several suggestions about how this new audience research can build on the old. For example, he believes we need to know how Nielsen Co. selects its viewing families. We also need to better understand what producers and writers assume about audiences in the process of deciding what will work on a given program.

Finally, Allen proposed a reorganization of academic media studies of TV based on this new audience research. He believes this approach would lead students from study of their own personal uses for the medium to consider questions of TV's economic basis, institutional structure, and textual strategies. Students would be prompted to think about how the medium of TV impacts those viewing in countries outside the U.S. which would lead to a broader understanding of the cultural impact of TV.

The second speaker, Elizabeth Long of Rice University, looks at the study of audiences from a more traditional media: books. Prof. Long's approach to audience research has been from a sociological study of literature and culture with an emphasis on the study of feminism. She acknowledges that her approach to audience research gives her a somewhat different perspective on audience studies than that of mass media scholars. Long emphasized her hope that "the view from literature" can "complement the work of the communication scholars in identifying new areas for theoretical and empirical investigation."

Prof. Long noted that in contrast to the traditional view of the TV audience, the traditional assumptions about the audience for literature "were that it was composed of critical and insightful individuals who were very like the literary critic." She gave the audience a historical perspective of how scholars are slowly changing their study of literary audiences from the traditional assumption of an "Ideal Reader." She cited the work of Norman Holland and David Bleich which sought to investigate how real readers responded to books. Long noted that even this

MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

COMMUNICATIONS FORUM

research had some shortcomings in that they investigated only college students and overemphasized individual psychological differences.

Prof. Long noted that early analysts of literary audiences made a distinction between high and mass culture which was "related to their own social position as conservators and evaluators of their culture." These early analysts pictured one group of readers that represented high culture that "actively mastered texts that represented what was best in a cultural heritage," while mass culture consumers "passively submitted to escapist fantasies."

She cited scholars like Smith and Tompkins as those who have "examined the institutional processes by which the literary canon has been established, challenged, and is authoritatively disseminated in the classroom." Their work has challenged the notion that "literary value is conferred in some 'natural' or disinterested fashion." Long referred to the work of Ohman which has shown that "books must have popular appeal (especially among the middle class) as well as critical acclaim to become contenders for canonical status."

She also provided the audience with an overview of the work of other scholars, such as Tuchman, who have studied the cultural's valuation of literary genres and form. Long notes that Tuchman's study of the evolution of the novel (which was once considered the realm of newly literate women readers) suggests that "who consumes the cultural product may be as important in determining its legitimacy as some essential quality of the thing itself."

Long described how some social groups have been able to organize themselves to "capture" a literary or cultural figure. She noted that Lawrence Levine has studied how this has been true of 19th century audiences of Shakespeare's work. Levine traced how early in the century popular audiences had claimed Shakespeare's "melodramas" as their own, while in the latter half of the century the threatened urban upper-class claimed Shakespeare by "enshrining his plays in expensive theatres that required genteel audience behavior." According to Long, it is this latter view that has transcended to our current day.

MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

COMMUNICATIONS FORUM

This distinction between mass culture and high culture has, according to Prof. Long, been systematically articulated by Pierre Bourdieu. This scholar correlated cultural taste with socio-cultural position of different groups and individuals; he believes that in the reproduction of late capitalist society the distribution of "cultural capital" is as important as distribution of "economic capital." Like money, cultural capital is passed down through families such that formal education has no impact on the status it confers. However, Long argues, some like John Fiske and the members of the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies have criticized Bourdieu's model as a relatively static quasi-economic model.

Long went on to discuss some areas which she believes are crucial and thus far underinvestigated:

Prof. Long believes that audience research has gotten to the point where it acknowledges the audience as active and complex. She is very interested in questions about methods that might be promising for investigating these literary audiences and what sites would be the most fruitful for their investigation. She believes it is crucial to see how social-structural patterns (class, gender, ethnic and national groupings) among audiences enable and limit interpretive freedom. She disagrees with older models which implied either "total ideological control and structural determinism," or a voluntaristic notion of culture as an unlimited repertoire or 'tool kit'." Long believes we have to look more closely at the perhaps subtle relationship between "people's social situation, their sense of identity, their activity as cultural audiences, and how much 'play' they have in that activity."

The second question Long wants to address has to do with the kinds of meanings groups and individuals make of "cultural artifacts," the kinds of engagements they enter into. Long believes to study this area one must build on the newer notion that audience response is active and creative in nature. She still believes that study should provide for "naturalistic" observation of audiences and allow for audience members to express their own definitions of their situation and the meaning of their activity. She believes that a research strategy must then allow the researchers to view innovative cultural usages and new cultural meanings. Long notes therefore that the "new

MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

COMMUNICATIONS FORUM

audience research" has "gravitated toward ethnographic methods."

Long discussed three theoretical/empirical sites that she believes are promising for carrying forward audience research. The first she defines as the "act" or "process" of cultural engagements with texts, programs, or music. In this vein, she pointed to her own study of reading groups that have shed light on people's reasons for participating in this cultural form and highlights what is missing from their real lives. Long's research revealed, for example, that housewives "see adult conversation about ideas as a lifeline out of their housebound existence."

Long noted that these and other reader's comments indicate that people want "conversation with texts and other people that can restore a sense of substance or depth, and wholeness or integration, sadly lacking in many of our institutions." She presented the results of Radway's study of romance novel readers; the readers can no longer be derogatorily labelled users of "escapist trash" when we are told they perceive their action of picking up a book as a declaration of independence from their families. Long also urges us to question the traditional images that our culture has of learned men toiling alone to create literary works, since these images "obscure our understanding of the process of literary and other cultural production."

Prof. Long believes the second site of fruitful investigation is that of "choice" and "selection." She believes that examining what people read can tell you as much about the power of cultural authorities as it can about people's ability to challenge any authoritative constraints. Long alluded to her own research which shows how institutions of book marketing work to shape reader's choice: "chain bookstores have fast-turnover stocking policies and publishers make decisions about what books to issue in paperback." She also explained that from her research on readings groups she has found the members are aware of a "hierarchy of taste" that values the classics over romance novels although members may find themselves preferring to read what they like. Her study of both men's and women's reading group's lead to the conclusion that "maybe we should say that if a book inspires a good discussion, it's a classic."

MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

COMMUNICATIONS FORUM

Long pointed to the third promising site for audience research as the area of interpretation, "decoding," or the activity of meaning-making. She believes the work of scholars like Susan Kippax has "extended Bourdieu's discussion of cultural capital by analyzing how individual's are socialized to the attitudes and skills necessary for an appreciation of high culture, such as opera and theatre." Prof. Long is interested in studying the process of creating highly involved audiences ("fans") and how people may then influence the creative process. She believes that study of people's social world is integral in understanding how books and other media affect audience.

Long does not believe that theorists, including the more radical ones like Fiske, are concerned enough with the "emotional cathexis that pulls people into cultural products and conditions them how to use them." She again alluded to her own work with readers of fiction to illustrate how reading group members "move through and take from books." The members of her reading groups sought to "see themselves" in characters and use the insight to reflect on their own lives, often in a therapeutic way.

Finally Long pointed to the work of Kenneth Burke on "literature as equipment for living" as a call for future research. She believes we might be able to understand audience activity more fully by "seeing how people in transition define and change themselves through uses of cultural artifacts, and studying how 'collectivities' of people draw on literature and other media in their roles as social actors."

The third speaker, Ellen Wartella of the University of Illinois, admitted that her message is similar to that of the first two speakers in her desire to expand the perspective of the new audience research. Her background is in the areas of developmental and cognitive psychology, with a particular focus on studies of children and television. She noted that the rise in popularity of research on this area began in the late 1960's. Sparked by Piaget's work on how children think about their world and the emergence of planned educational TV on the airwaves, scholars were raising questions about what programming would lead children to learn from TV.

Prof. Wartella was quick to assert that today there is a

MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

COMMUNICATIONS FORUM

popular misconception about children's viewership of TV. She believes that children are "very active and interactive watchers of TV." Wartella provided us with a thorough review of the literature of traditional audience research in the area of children and TV.

According to Prof. Wartella three sets of beliefs have evolved in traditional audience research in this area:

- (1.) those who believe you need to study children's cognitive development to understand their TV viewership;
- (2.) those focused on the study of programming content and how writer/producers have used production techniques to distort time and space;
- (3.) those concerned with understanding children's social interaction with TV, which might include, for example, how children react with siblings while watching TV.

In supporting her view that children actively watch TV she referred to several studies including laboratory studies concerned with attention span which involved measuring eye movement, ethnographic studies done in American homes, and studies that have involved personal interviews with children. She noted that studies have revealed that children have definite preferences when watching TV. For example, children were found to prefer watching women over men, children like to watch other children on TV (especially if they are the same age), and technically speaking "zooms" and "pans" keep their attention.

Wartella described a study (Lemish) which focused on children between the ages of 6 1/2 months and 2 1/2 years of age which found that even toddlers have "favorite" shows. The study revealed that children watch TV at an earlier age than first believed. According to Wartella, the study also looked at the interaction of language between mother and child during TV programming and found children can actually use TV as an "active book" to learn language. Children were found to recognize characters over time and mothers answered their baby's questions about what was happening on TV.

Prof. Wartella noted that these findings are contrary to the traditional view of linguists who say children cannot learn language from TV. She believes the more recent research has revealed that we have "underestimated the role of TV as a tool for children's language development." She believes that TV is as much an auditory media as a visual media.

MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

COMMUNICATIONS FORUM

Prof. Wartella recalled the details of a study she had done of siblings and TV. She paired young children with their third grade siblings to see how children learn to understand TV. This experimental study used content from the show One Day At A Time. Wartella found that there were three major categories of talk between the children: (1.) talk about the characters, (2.) discussion of on-going action, and (3.) talk of difficulty understanding motivations of actions. It was clear from her research that children have to learn to understand television.

Wartella believes that the vast literature that has been produced on how children come to understand TV has been sparked by the rise in new technologies. She suggests that the new audience research be focused on how children become part of the "common culture." She believes this calls for a return to the literature of Bigatsky which looks at TV as the dominant activity of american culture.