



Sharing Experience

Audiences in Media, Communication and Cultural Studies

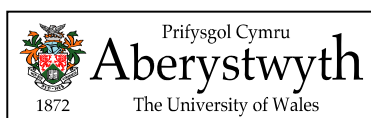


A MeCCSA Postgraduate Network Symposium

Department of Theatre, Film and Television Studies

The University of Wales, Aberystwyth

3-4 April 2007



Conference Report

Meeting likeminded researchers was one of the key attractions for delegates attending the MeCCSA Postgraduate Network's first ever regional event, *Sharing Experience – Audiences in Media, Communication and Cultural Studies*, in April this year. The symposium took place over two days at the Department of Theatre, Film and Television Studies, University of Wales, Aberystwyth (UWA), and sought to provide a forum where research students in media, communication and cultural studies could present and discuss their work in a friendly and supportive environment. Two workshops, one on methodology and one on teaching audience research, were designed to further develop and strengthen the broad field of audience and reception studies by offering the opportunity to discuss individual struggles and experiences. The teaching workshop also encouraged delegates to conceive of prospective teaching possibilities within the subject area and related disciplines. *Sharing Experience* set out to fulfil the PGN's aim of ensuring peer support and forming important teaching and learning networks for future contacts and collaborations. With twenty-four registered delegates, the event achieved a more personal and relaxed atmosphere, which was welcomed by all.

Established in 1973, the Department of Theatre, Film and Television Studies at UWA offers a variety of practical, design and academic courses relating to the study of theatre, performance, television, film, media and communication at undergraduate and postgraduate level. Its research interests span a wide range of topics, including (virtual) performance, media regulation, broadcasting history, film music, online identities, television genres, cult films, folklore and film, media semiotics, and advertising. It has also become a centre for audience and reception research, having conducted such large scale research projects as the international reception of *The Lord of the Rings – Return of the King* (funded by the ESRC) and, more recently, the Extreme Film Research (BBFC-funded), both directed by Professor Martin Barker. The department currently hosts [Particip@tions](http://www.participations.org/index.htm) (<http://www.participations.org/index.htm>), the only online journal devoted to the study of cultural and media audiences, and since 2003 has been offering the first Masters programme of its kind, the [MA in Audience in Reception Studies](http://www.aber.ac.uk/tfts/en/teaching/schemes/postgrad/audience/) (<http://www.aber.ac.uk/tfts/en/teaching/schemes/postgrad/audience/>)

The department's research and teaching expertise made it an ideal setting for a training event like *Sharing Experience*. Delegates from a range of institutions in England and Wales attended the

symposium: There were representations from Cardiff University, Goldsmiths College, Lancaster University, the London School of Economics, Royal Holloway, St. Mary's University College, Thames Valley University, the University of Nottingham, the University of Sussex, the University of Westminster, and UWA.

Professor Jenny Kitzinger from the Cardiff School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies opened the event with an engaging plenary session that looked back over her personal and academic life and situated her interest in the sustainability, recreation and change of cultures within the general context of seventy-five years of media and audience research. Her suggestion to delegates was to imagine research projects within a carefully woven spider's web, in which the researcher acts as the creative, decision-making spider, rather than the fly that is stuck in the trap. Audience research, she argued, does not occur in a simple linear process from designing the research question to gathering material and presenting one's findings. Nor does it happen within a vacuum. It is characterised by and embedded within various intertwined processes and concerns, such as questions of *who* is looking at the audience, and *why*.

Audiences are envisaged in different ways and questions about the audience are framed accordingly, depending on the academic, economic, political, social, cultural and personal contexts in which research takes place. How we frame the audience (e.g. as citizens, consumers, stakeholders, public(s), users, or communities), and which research focus we choose (e.g. that of media influence or media use, that of pleasure, identity or interpretation) necessarily impacts upon our methods of data collection. Equally, our research tactics will affect the nature and uses of our findings, as well as the sorts of projects we might embark upon. As Kitzinger pointed out, from her work on audience responses regarding media representations of AIDS (conducted at the Glasgow Media Group) to her interest in the reporting of child abuse and the more recent concern about citizenship and human cloning, her research has been marked by her own life history, as well as by very particular societal events, both on local and wider levels. Over the years she has come to favour focus group research as her preferred method of investigation, while her political commitment has continued to inform her research focus and approach. Significance, she reasoned, lies in the researcher's ability to situate one's work in any given array of contexts, and to maintain a reflexive frame of mind throughout.

A number of parallel strands of panel presentations followed Professor Kitzinger's keynote speech. Papers had been accepted from postgraduate students at different stages of research,

addressing issues of research design and conduct, preliminary findings, as well as more advanced, almost fully developed results. On Day One, papers covered topics around 'Cross-cultural Perceptions and Diaspora' and 'Audience Engagements'. In Panel 1.1, Grace Reid from Cardiff University presented some early findings on the ways different audiences relate to the BBC drama-documentary *If... cloning could cure us*. Her focus group material from Canada and the UK suggested some changes in people's attitudes towards therapeutic cloning in response to viewing the programme. Richard Kpabi from the University of Westminster presented an ethnographic account of syncretisation and identity redefinition in the transmediated context of Ghanaian families living in London. His paper particularly illustrated generational differences in the Ghanaians' transnational identity formation, based on the interplay between inherited and mediated culture.

Two speakers from UWA presented in Panel 1.2. Rebekah Smith's research focuses on fans' emotional responses to and relationships with films by Quentin Tarantino. Her paper discussed issues of the sublime with regards to online discussions on the forthcoming film *Grindhouse* (2007), and sought to combine insights from cognitive film theory with those of qualitative audience research. Lauren Anderson's paper outlined some of the key issues she has encountered in moving beyond currently published text-centred approaches to the reception of popular music soundtracks. Instead of relying on the theorisation of audience responses, she sought to find a way of encouraging people's talk about popular music in film, and three romantic comedies in particular: *10 Things I Hate About You* (1999), *What Women Want* (2000), and *Love Actually* (2003).

The four panels on Day Two were devoted to 'New and Alternative Media', 'Fear, Risk and Censorship', 'Audiences Online' and 'Audience Methodologies Across Time'. Panel 2.1 included papers by Patrick McCurdy and Ulla Rannikko from the London School of Economics, as well as Daniel Ashton from Lancaster University. Taking the Dissent! network as a case study, McCurdy problematised Atkinson and Dougherty's (2006) 'Resistance Performance Paradigm', with its central focus on alternative media use as signifier of resistance, and instead suggested viewing people's consumption of alternative media within a broader framework of 'media practice'. Rannikko discussed the notion of audience activity with regards to the kinds of new opportunities offered to 'users' of online alternative media. Presenting some key themes from semi-structured interviews with citizen reporters, she demonstrated the active production of media content through citizen journalism on such media platforms as Indymedia and OhmyNews

International. Ashton's paper, while concerned with digital games audiences, created a useful link with both McCurdy and Rannikko's re-conceptualisations of the audience by discussing gaming as both productive and participatory, conceiving of the relationship between game audiences and developers as communities of practice.

Theresa Cronin from Goldsmith's College, University of London, and Kerstin Leder from UWA contributed to Panel 2.2, 'Fear, Risk and Censorship'. The reception of *Wolf Creek* (2005) formed the basis of Cronin's talk. She highlighted the ways in which discourses surrounding the film functioned to create normative social viewing strategies, for instance by framing specific physical and affective responses to *Wolf Creek* as 'normal' or 'abnormal'. Leder's work touched upon similar issues with regards to the kinds of emotional responses three-generational families in Germany and the UK deemed appropriate or legitimate in connection with particular media material. Her paper took one semi-structured interview as a working example to draw out different categories of emotion discourse in people's talk about media-related fears and anxieties.

Under the heading of 'Audiences Online', Panel 3.1 included papers from Nottingham, Thames Valley and Cardiff University. Sabrina Yu discussed Western fans' responses to Jet Li's screen presence, with a specific focus on his relationships with female leads in *Romeo Must Die* (2000), *Kiss of the Dragon* (2001), *The One* (2001), and *Danny the Dog* (2005). Her investigation of IMDb discussion fora led her to conclude that Li is constructed by fans and producers alike as an asexual Chinese male stereotype whilst, simultaneously, his buddy relationship with Western female co-stars introduces Hollywood to an Eastern take on interracial romance. In the subsequent paper, Linda Stacey described her experience as a fan and researcher on a female fan forum devoted to the television drama *24*, providing information on the nature and function of participation in the community and revealing some emergent patterns as regards the order of discussion and practice on the forum. Rebecca Williams' paper was concerned with issues of 'post-object fandom', or fandom that persists after the object of interest has ceased to exist, which was exemplified by online forum discussions surrounding the termination of *The West Wing*. Drawing on work by Anthony Giddens, she considered the ways in which fans came to terms with the end of show and actively re-evaluated their own fan identities.

Finally, Panel 3.2 was devoted to 'Audience Methodologies Across Time'. Sarah Ralph from UWA started by introducing the methodological framework of her PhD study on the shared cultural

history of different generations of women in relation to film stardom. One particular point of consideration was the design and conduct of online questionnaires. Elizabeth Evans from Royal Holloway discussed issues of methodology with regards to her study on audiences' use of new media technologies, such as internet and mobile phone technologies as new sources of television content. Her paper centred on the shifting nature of audience opinions and evaluations, which she problematised in the light of her focus group material. Daniel Day from the University of Westminster rounded off the panel with his discussion of the challenges of historical audience research, with a specific focus on the question of research on regional audiences conducted by the BBC in the 1970s and 1980s. As Day pointed out, the work of the media historian is hampered in this area due some inadequacies in the institutional approach and the lack of alternative information sources.

A workshop on research methodology on Day One of *Sharing Experience* directly engaged with the aforementioned challenges, as well as with other methodological considerations postgraduates sought to discuss in the group. Professor Martin Barker from UWA led the workshop, and encouraged delegates to deliberate on the strengths and weaknesses of particular research strategies. A list of methodological traditions in audience research had been circulated in advance of the workshop, and the session aimed to draw out some of the most relevant ones and discuss them in the light of the questions they would answer, their implications for the role of the researcher, as well as the key issues that needed to be addressed in relation to design, conduct and analysis. The pros and cons of focus group research constituted an initial point of debate: The researcher's ability to investigate talk in interaction, to compile information on debates and group dynamics, as well as to encourage participant-led talk were considered as particular plus points of the method. The risk of failing to follow up possibly significant comments during the focus group, the problem of giving too much emphasis to dominant voices, and the amount of time devoted to transcribing the material were deemed less advantageous.

Individual obstacles and experiences were discussed in the group, and one more general point was put forward as a reflexive marker for postgraduate researchers who were asked to bear their object of investigation in mind. Not only were methodological considerations important in establishing how best to answer particular research questions, it was also necessary to determine why anybody should believe one's results and conclusions. Thus researchers need to maintain a degree of reflexivity and transparency throughout the research process.

The second workshop at *Sharing Experience*, led jointly by Prof. Barker and Dr. Kate Egan (UWA), was devoted to issues of teaching audience and reception studies at undergraduate level. It was noted that audience research remained an underdeveloped area in the academic curriculum, with only a small number of delegates having in fact been 'taught' how to conduct audience research during their own studies. Barker and Egan asked delegates to reflect upon the kinds of issues they would have liked to have covered in the course of their undergraduate years. They would have welcomed information on the history of audience and reception research, on the wider theoretical and political frameworks in which research has occurred over the years, and particularly on the kinds of studies that were out there, on the sorts of questions that had been asked and the methods that had been employed. Furthermore, they would have been keen to experience audience research on a learning-by-doing basis. Small research exercises, it was argued, would have generated first-hand knowledge on the kinds of practical and ethical considerations that would have been difficult to envisage through theoretical applications alone.

More detailed discussion followed around the issue of how best to design an audience studies course that would include the elements mentioned above whilst leaving enough room for students to make sense of what they had learned and to experience research in practice. Delegates were encouraged to take on the course leader's position and imagine guiding undergraduate students through one of three research projects. Working together in groups, they elaborated on the kinds of background material they would point their students towards, the general guidance they felt was necessary in the light of each project, as well as the sets of criteria that could be applied to assessing the work. Putting emphasis on the ability of narrowing down one's research focus, for instance, was deemed a useful component to pieces of assessment, as was the students' ability to reflect upon the research process. On the whole, the workshop succeeded in encouraging delegates to think through the practicalities of teaching audience studies, in the light of both ethical implications and pedagogical considerations.

A provocative plenary session by Professor Martin Barker closed the symposium at the end of Day Two. The great variety in subject matters and approaches presented during *Sharing Experience* prompted Barker to re-evaluate the current state of audience and reception studies, and particularly the area's lack of a shared and dominant model. One of the problems he saw in audience research from a broad media and cultural studies perspective was its

tendency to check existing claims about the audience, claims that have emerged from such areas as American mass communication research, textual analyses in film and television studies, or general public discourses. As such, questions for audience researchers have always been set by other people, often centring on the dangers and effects of the media, on issues of ideology and the general transmission of messages. This, it was argued, limits our role as audience researchers and does not allow us to fulfil what Barker considered our main purpose, that of developing 'good, reliable and trustworthy knowledge'.

In his talk, Barker identified four competing models in audience research: 1) appropriations of Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding model, 2) fan studies, 3) domestication studies, which deal with the media within people's routines and everyday lives, and 4) issues of technology transformations and the changing concept of the audience as players, users and/or participators. All of the above employ different methods of investigation in order to answer a variety of different research questions. None of them can be described as dominant model. What ties them together are issues of 'identity', a concept which Barker saw as a somewhat 'soft refuge for audience research', and one that is being used in so many different ways that it risks losing its meaning altogether.

Instead, Barker suggested shifting focus towards the development of a model of community or collectivity, and further investigating the idea that all audiences are located in time and space, embedded in local and larger societies and histories. Audiences do not, Barker argued, come to the media as innocent, unprepared or vulnerable subjects: They come prepared with prior knowledges, expectations and desires. Instead of seeing the media as impacting upon members of the audience, it might be fruitful to consider the media as extensions of the self. Media are experienced with and in relation to other people, both in terms of the physical presence of fellow members of the audience and in terms of 'imagined' or 'projective' communities. Likewise, it does not make sense to Barker to speak of media 'texts', but to conceive of the media as some kind of 'transactional form'. Quoting and elaborating on Marx who once said that 'the history of mankind [was] the history of the emergence of the five senses', Barker concluded that the way we are able to relate to the world has developed through history, and now includes far more than five senses. Significance then lies in the way we feel things and relate to the world around us. Barker finally urged delegates to continue their careers in audience and reception research, to develop and test their work in this tradition, so that

future postgraduate students will have sufficient ground upon which to build, instead of having to start from scratch.

General feedback on *Sharing Experience* was excellent. Delegates enjoyed the relatively small size of the event, the low conference and accommodation fee, and the fact that they could finally meet other audience researchers in the field. Particular mentions were given to the usefulness of the methodology and the teaching workshops, though some students would have welcomed more time devoted to both sessions. It was noted that 'the atmosphere was genuinely "sharing"' and that 'the sessions provided a chance to talk with each other as opposed to *at* each other'.

Our sincere thanks go to all *Sharing Experience* delegates, both to speakers and attendees, who contributed to making this event unique and successful. We are indebted to Prof. Jenny Kitzinger, Prof. Martin Barker and Dr. Kate Egan for their support and inspiration. Last but not least, we would like to thank the MeCCSA Postgraduate Network (in collaboration with the Art Design Media Subject Centre at the Higher Education Academy, ADM-HEA) and the Department of Theatre, Film and Television Studies at UWA for co-funding *Sharing Experience* and providing valuable resources.

I would personally like to thank my colleagues at the PGN executive committee for their generous backing, advice and encouragement, as well as Lauren Anderson and the rest of the *SE* Organising Committee at UWA for putting so much effort and energy into the conception and running of the event.

At the risk of sounding hammy... it has been a pleasure to share this experience with you!

*Kerstin Leder, MeCCSA Postgraduate Network Executive Committee
University of Wales, Aberystwyth, 6 April 2007*