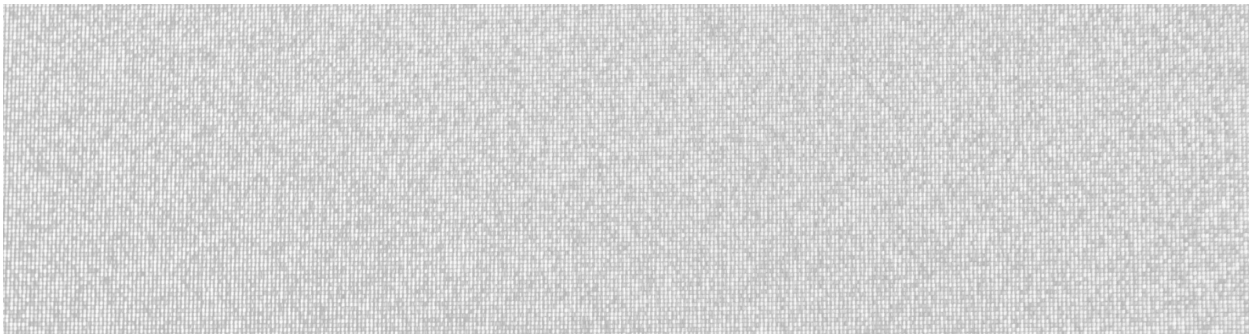


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# From the Networks to New Media: Making Sense of Television Audiences

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## INTRODUCTION

For the past half-century and more, television has occupied a central place in American domestic and national culture. Unsurprisingly, much time and energy has been devoted to studying television audiences. And yet, paradoxically, the more we know, the less coherent the concept of the audience becomes. Particularly in the multimodal, multiplatform, convergent, digital-interactive, 'new media' era, what constitutes 'television' let alone the 'television audience' is by no means self-evident. What we now call television is an inseparable part of media streams that people encounter everyday across a wide variety of contexts. In her 2004 article 'The challenge of changing audiences: Or, what is the audience researcher to do in the age of the internet?' Sonia Livingstone characterizes the television audience as a 'moving target' for scholars. Surely it is that. This movement hasn't so much deterred research as posed new questions and challenges, especially in terms of methodology.

This chapter explores some key movements and moments in the study of television audiences, which necessarily means exploring concepts such as commodification, reception, consumption, and participation. This exploration is far from exhaustive, of course. The bodies of work focused on television audiences, broadly conceived, stretch wide and deep. They encompass different theoretical traditions, countless methodological choices and competencies, varied national and international industrial systems, local and global interdependencies, and different cultural/intellectual priorities. Mine is one perspective, shaped by the specificities and idiosyncrasies of my own training and social location, including the American context.

In what follows, I first provide a brief summary and overview of key theoretical traditions that grapple with broad questions regarding the role and place of television in American society. Conceptualizations of the television audience are implicit rather than explicit in much of this work, often couched

in a language of influences or effects. I then examine three different empirical approaches to researching audiences – three different interventions – that represent distinct ways of thinking about audiences. The first is industrial, in which the audience is a commodity measured and sold to advertisers by media companies. The main focus here is on measurement and ratings. The second intervention reflects a body of academic work that typically goes by the unsexy label ‘reception studies’, in which viewers/readers actively interpret television texts under specific socio-cultural conditions. Included here are ethnographic approaches to television audiences, by which I mean approaches that demonstrate various degrees of interest in and attention to material context (under what circumstances do people watch/use television?) instead of or in addition to symbolic content (what meanings do viewers make of what they watch?). The third is the scholarly study of fans and fandoms, which could be subsumed under reception and/or ethnographic approaches but which I treat separately because fandoms hold open the promise of moving us away from notions of ‘audiences’ toward notions of ‘publics’, an important distinction I borrow from Daniel Dayan (2001). These three approaches do not so much reflect chronological developments in the study of television audiences (note, for instance, that industrial ratings are more sophisticated and influential than ever before) as different methodological choices stemming from different assumptions about presumed passivity versus activity on the part of viewers/users. Finally, I conclude with a brief discussion of some key challenges associated with studying television and television audiences in the new media era. In their recent book *Spreadable Media*, Henry Jenkins and his colleagues ask ‘what constitutes meaningful participation’ in our contemporary media environment? (Jenkins et al., 2013, pp. 153–194). Their insights are particularly relevant for the study of television, and for understanding persistent inequalities surrounding media access and use.

## SOME THEORIES OF TELEVISION AND SOCIETY

Historically, scholarly interest in the social role and impact of television has been driven by the medium’s pervasiveness, as well as its ability to bring the outside world into the home and thereby connect disparate individuals to one another in virtual space via notions of ‘the audience’. The fact that millions of people watched the same program simultaneously formed the basis for caring and theorizing about television. As Leo Bogart wrote in 1956, ‘with no other form of impersonal communication has the sharing of experience been possible on so universal a scale and to so intense a degree as with television’ (p. 2). In the early years as today, television – and mass media more generally – prompted considerable debate about the changing nature of society, the public sphere and the public good.

In a positive vein, social scientists such as John Dewey, William James and Robert Park believed that mass media, if managed well, could strengthen democracy by socializing people into a common set of norms and values (Grindstaff and Turow, 2006). Marshall McLuhan (1964) posited an even more optimistic (some say celebratory) view of electronic media as enabling a global village transcending time and place, a thesis later explored in a more detailed and historicized fashion by Joshua Meyrowitz (1985). Less optimistically, the rise of mass communications, in concert with industrialization and technological change, was said to breed cultural mediocrity (according to mass society critiques) and/or inhibit revolutionary class consciousness (according to Marxist critiques). Adorno (1957), for example, in concert with other scholars of the Frankfurt School, denounced television for insinuating the capitalist mode of production into everyday leisure, including into people’s psychic lives. Baudrillard (1983) also took a pessimistic/deterministic stance, suggesting that the primary effect of television was to substitute a representation of reality (simulacrum) for reality itself.

In her now-classic essay 'Audience Control' Muriel Cantor (1980) notes how both the mass society and Marxist critiques of television, which mirrored concerns about forms of mass media preceding television, contained implicit assumptions of audiences as powerless and manipulable – either by technology or capitalist ideology or both. Television had negative 'effects' on society because audience response was said to be determined in large measure by the industrial nature of the medium. Unsurprisingly, this stood in stark contrast to early industry discourse about the television audience, which positioned viewers as 'in control' of television content in the form of ratings. As Cantor points out, the industry perspective didn't necessarily position the audience as active, but nor did it position the audience as a passive, undifferentiated mass; rather, the audience was understood to be a market of specific demographic characteristics, some subset of which was said to shape programming through ratings (more on this topic shortly).

Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony complicated Marxist critiques of the media and paved the way for another set of influential theories of television, beginning in the 1970s. In arguing that particular relations of ruling prevail not because they are imposed on people against their will but because they are accepted as common sense by the rulers and the ruled alike, Gramsci offered a more nuanced theory of power that posited ideology as collectively held and needing to be continually re-secured. These ideas influenced Todd Gitlin (1979), for example, who was interested in how prime-time television could be simultaneously appealing to audiences and sustain class hegemony. Although not passive, the audience in Gitlin's view had limited power to influence content because the commercial system is able to absorb and harmonize conflicting demands and definitions of reality in ways that ultimately reaffirm the status quo. The hegemony concept also found expression in the work of Raymond Williams (1974), Horace Newcomb (1974), Gaye Tuchman (1974), Stuart Hall (1980)

and Douglas Kellner (1981), among others, all of whom emphasized television as a site of contradiction where meaning is struggled over and not simply given or assumed. Newcomb in particular helped shift the discussion of television from a discourse of 'mass communication' to a discourse of 'popular culture', with an attendant shift in the degree of agency accorded audiences. In *TV: The Most Popular Art*, Newcomb emphasized the complexity of television entertainment with regard to plot, character and genre, and the multiple levels of meaning available to viewers in making sense of television narratives.

It was Raymond Williams (1974) and Stuart Hall (1980), however, who were most influential in shaping the study of television within the context of the emerging field of cultural studies in the UK and abroad. I will discuss Hall in a later section, for it was his encoding-decoding model that inspired much of what we now call reception studies, including the empirical study of television audiences. Williams' influence was in some ways more mobile and wide-ranging, inspiring a new generation of scholars in the humanities (particularly those trained in film analysis) who welcomed ways of thinking about television as something other than discrete programs to be analyzed or a capitalist institution to be condemned (see Spigel, 1992). His 1974 book, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*, elucidated the concept of 'flow' – the movement of fragmented text across time and space – and forced a consideration of television as a mode of address that structured experience apart from specific questions of content or message. Williams argued that television is both an intention and an effect of the social order, including relations of power and inequality, and as such it offers people a kind of language or grammar for understanding and negotiating those relations. The idea that television has an industrial mode of address – an experiential aesthetic – was fruitfully employed and debated by other scholars (see Ellis, 1982; Kaplan, 1983; Newcombe and Hirsch, 1983; Browne, 1984; Fiske, 1987; Caldwell, 1995; Lembo, 2000) and remains

an important touchstone for rethinking televisual aesthetics in light of recent industrial and technological change (see Boddy, 2004; Caldwell, 2004; Parks, 2004; Uricchio, 2004; Wood, 2007).

### **PAINT-BY-NUMBERS TELEVISION: THE AUDIENCE AS COMMODITY**

Far removed from discussions of hegemony and flow, the television industry from the very beginning has had its own preferred way of thinking about audiences: in terms of ratings, as commodities to be measured and sold to advertisers. Indeed, the vast majority of time and money devoted to researching audiences occurs outside of academia. Ratings research is important to discuss here, not because it accurately assesses what television audiences are up to, but because it animates a critical discourse among scholars with an imperative for operationalizing audiences differently. Currently, Nielsen Media Research retains its monopoly over television ratings production, even as the Nielsen company itself has changed hands (it is now owned by the Dutch media conglomerate VNU). The function of the company is to put a value on advertising time, as determined by the size of a program's audience and other audience demographics such as age, sex and income. According to Nielsen statistics, Americans spend more than 34 hours per week watching TV, plus another 3–6 hours per week watching recorded programs. The average household has access to more than 100 channels and several different television sets (Hinckley, 2012).

Dallas Smythe (1977) is typically credited with formulating a theory of the audience as commodity. Although not uncontested (see Caraway, 2011), this theory suggests that the activity of watching television represents a form of wageless labor that audiences engage in on behalf of advertisers. Audiences get rewarded with programming – what Smythe calls a 'free lunch' – in exchange for doing

the work of constituting themselves as a potential market for advertised goods. For Smythe, audiences are simultaneously doing productive work for the capitalist (the advertiser) and reproducing their own labor power as viewers of programming. Jhally and Livant (1986) argue something similar, substituting 'programmer' for 'advertiser' in the formulation. For them, the viewing audience, having already received its 'wage' in the form of programming, is working on behalf of the television programmer rather than the advertiser; the programmer then converts surplus watching time into additional advertising revenue.

As Brett Caraway (2011) notes, the industry construction of the audience as commodity is, in a very real sense, fictitious, because no one knows whether viewers exposed to specific advertising messages actually purchase the products advertised. Advertisers are thus not buying audience power but the ratings companies' promises about viewers' future purchasing behavior. Networks and cable companies pay ratings firms – predominantly, Nielsen – to help them reliably predict the realization of surplus value in the form of the consumption of goods, 'but the whole system of commodity exchange is speculative – the networks are acquiring credit based on surplus value which has yet to be realized' (Caraway, 2011, p. 701). For this reason, Caraway (2011) believes the economic transaction described by Smythe is better characterized as rent: the media owner rents the use of the medium to the advertiser who is interested in gaining access to an audience, and speculation on the size and quality of the audience determines the rent charged.

In her trenchant critique of the commodity audience, Eileen Meehan (1990) makes a related but different point when she notes that the measurement techniques used in ratings research construct the very thing being measured. Her careful historical account of the development of ratings systems in the US, beginning first with radio and extending to television, demonstrates that different methods produce different ratings for the same program, partly as an artifact of the methods themselves. Because the specter of different ratings for the

same programs threatens to disrupt the established business of buying and selling the commodity audience, networks and advertisers agree to accept a monopoly in ratings production if this monopoly can balance out discontinuities in demand (networks want to charge advertisers as much as possible for delivering audiences, advertisers want to pay as little as possible for those audiences), while satisfying the need for a single, agreed-upon measure of viewing in the form of the commodity audience.

The commodity audience is not viewers writ large, of course, but the subset of viewers who are sampled – until recently, mostly by paper diaries and electronic people meters installed in selected homes. The meters record what is being watched and who is watching, provided viewers remember to push log-in buttons (each member of the household has a button associated with her demographic information). Consequently, ratings do not represent the wishes of the television audience *qua* audience because most members of the viewing public are not measured and therefore literally don't count; rather, ratings reflect 'the forced choice behavior of the *commodity audience* within limitations set by continuities in demand, market conditions, production costs, and changing conditions in the general economy' (Meehan, 1990, pp. 126–127). Ratings are forms of measurement selected on the basis of economic goals, Meehan reminds us, not according to the rules of social science. 'The difference between the commodity audience and the public viewership, between manufacturing the commodity audience through ratings and measuring the public taste through social research cannot be over-emphasized' (Meehan, 1990, p. 127).

In the new media environment with the rise of digital television and the dispersal of television programming across multiple interfaces and delivery systems, the search for 'reliable' audience measures has taken some interesting turns. Nielsen has begun to track time-shifting on DVRs (where viewers can shift when they watch their chosen programs) and

is considering the use of cable set-box data (STB data), a transmission from the cable signal back to the cable operator that gives a complete picture – not just a sample – of what viewers in a particular place are tuned to at any given time ([www.nielsen.com/us](http://www.nielsen.com/us)). According to the *Hollywood Reporter*, Nielsen has partnered with Twitter to measure TV-related tweets, and is poised to install new hardware and software in its 23,000 sample homes to capture viewership not only on cable, satellite and over-the-air broadcasts but also devices that deliver streaming video services provided by companies like Netflix and Amazon (Block, 2013). The portable people meter (PPM), initially developed by Arbitron (a Nielsen rival-turned-acquisition), promises to extend the boundaries of media consumption to outside the home. Although not yet widely adopted, the PPM is a pager-sized device that monitors the individual viewer rather than the television set by picking up a unique digital code embedded in the audio tracks of all the radio and television channels that a PPM-wearer is exposed to throughout the day. Theoretically, with the cooperation of entertainment companies, it could detect everything from DVDs to video games to MP3 music files and even whether a person drives by a particular billboard or electronics store (Gertner, 2005). Of course, whether or not people are actually paying attention to the channels and signals registered by their PPM devices – or any of the in-home measurement tools, for that matter – is an open question. But the question may not matter much in the long run. The Nielsen-Arbitron experiment in PPMs has a twist: 70,000 PPM-wearers are being tracked, not for the sake of ratings, but to match all the advertisements and messages they hear to the actual purchases they make using bar-code technology (Gertner, 2005).

If the new media era represents challenges for audience measurement, it also changes the nature of the 'labor' performed by audiences for media owners and advertisers. Indeed, as television itself proliferates across the digital landscape, so does the potential 'work' of television audiences. Philip Napoli (2010)

notes that the notion of the audience-as-worker, which may not have been entirely persuasive when what was being monetized was the act of watching television programs, becomes decidedly more concrete in the new media environment where audiences not only watch/receive but create/use content. Today, 'the creative work of the audience is an increasingly important source of economic value for media organizations' (Napoli, 2010, p. 511). The industry itself clearly recognizes this, even if individual users – and some of the academics writing about them – do not. The wealth of scholarly work on fandom notwithstanding, scholars lag behind industry stakeholders in thinking about audiences as producers as well as consumers of content (see also Turow, 2005).

What is the nature of audience productivity, from an industry perspective? The way Napoli describes it, Web 2.0 applications such as Facebook and YouTube enable people to communicate in a community of sorts, with the advertising revenues they generate being derived from audience attention captured with content produced by members of that user/audience community. In other words, 'aggregating or providing a common platform for user-generated content, and then selling advertising on these platforms, represents the core business model of most Web 2.0 applications' (Napoli, 2010, p. 512). User 'content' extends beyond selfies and home-made videos, of course. User-generated content comes in the form of comments, ratings and reviews for products and services, which represent an important source of monetized value for organizations involved in the production and distribution of media. Audiences further create value for advertisers when they assist with the actual marketing of products – producing their own commercials, engaging in word-of-mouth endorsements online (sharing, liking, recommending), and/or integrating brand messages into their own Facebook or MySpace pages (Napoli, 2010, p. 512). And then there is the work of audiences in helping to generate popularity and buzz for specific programs on fan pages, chat rooms and

message boards, not to mention the 'work' of voting people off an island or fashion runway in the latest reality program.

Consequently, as Napoli observes, the old distinction between scholars who claimed audiences are working for advertisers (Smythe, 1977) and those who claimed audiences are working for programmers (Jhally and Livant, 1986) has collapsed, because, in the new media era, audiences are clearly working for both. For Napoli, what is so remarkable about this development is the extent to which people (1) engage in the production of media content absent any expectation of financial compensation, and (2) appear willing to allow others – notably media organizations – to capture the revenue generated by their aggregated effort. Mark Andrejevic (2004) and others have extended this argument in important ways beyond audiences to the on-camera participants of reality-based programming, whose flexible, insecure, non-union and largely uncompensated labor generates enormous profits for the television industry. The 'work of being watched' and the willingness of people to engage in this work – including but not limited to reality-TV participants and those seeking visibility on YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, etc. – is consistent with the push toward new forms of celebrity and a new culture of surveillance in which watching and being watched is increasingly normalized and monetized (Andrejevic, 2004; Ouellete and Hay, 2008).

## TELEVISION RECEPTION: BEYOND PEOPLE METERS

The 'television audience' as measured by industry stakeholders operates within a closed feedback system informed by industrial logic. 'Institutional knowledge is not interested in the social world of actual audiences ... [but] in an objectified category of users to be controlled', writes Ien Ang. '[This construction] enables television institutions to develop strategies to conquer the audience so as to

reproduce their own mechanisms of survival' (1991, p. 154).

Reception studies emerged partly in response to the industrial logic as defined above, and partly in response to traditions of social science research focused on media 'effects'. The results of laboratory experiments, content analyses and large-scale attitudinal surveys published in mainstream academic journals from the 1960s onward (typically by psychologists, social psychologists, or mass communication scholars trained in statistical methods) formed a significant core of research on the topic of television audiences, although practitioners generally did not claim membership in something called television studies or audience studies. In contrast to effects researchers who saw themselves as scientists testing hypotheses, reception studies scholars saw themselves as analysts exploring/theorizing an interactive process. To paraphrase James Halloran (1970), the question in reception studies is not what the media does to people, but what people do to the media.

When examining qualitative traditions of television audience research, it is difficult to disentangle media studies from cultural studies, particularly in the UK where a focus on media developed in tandem with cultural studies. Both Stuart Hall's (1980) encoding-decoding model of media reception and the interview-based studies of television audiences by Morley (1980) and Hobson (1982) were foundational in shaping growing scholarly interest in the qualitative, experiential dimensions of television reception and use (as well as engagement with other forms of popular culture). Reception theory, reader-response theory, the text-reader model, ethnographic studies of audiences, and even 'uses and gratifications' research – all are interventions in the reception studies tradition that, in different ways and to varying degrees, move us away from an understanding of 'the audience' as an effect of the text or production process toward the notion of audiences as active makers of meaning. For this reason, Fiske (1987, p. 16) prefers the term 'reader' over 'audience' in referring to television viewers,

as the latter implies 'a homogeneous mass of people who are all essentially identical, who receive the same messages, meanings and ideologies from the same programs, and who are essentially passive'. He later coined the term 'audiencing' to make much the same point, believing the verb form of the noun better captures the active, participatory quality of television consumption (Fiske, 1992). John Hartley (1999), too, has been a strong proponent of the 'active audience' paradigm. This is not a more objective conceptualization of the audience, only a different one. As Fiske (1989) insists, there is no such thing as 'the television audience' apart from the methods used to study it (see also Allor, 1988; Dayan, 2001). The main contribution of reception studies is to demonstrate the meaning-making capacity of audiences within particular cultural and historical contexts, underscoring the diversity of meanings, the diversity of interpretive practices and the diversity of audiences, while still retaining notions of textual structure, industrial practice and social location. Although not focused on television, Janice Radway's (1984) important study of romance readers is clearly an early intervention along these lines.

In his essay 'Encoding/decoding', Hall (1980) theorized the media-audience circuit as reciprocal but not equal: the ideology of the culture industries may be hegemonic and work to secure social and political consensus, but people may respond to and interpret media texts in a variety of ways. For Hall, there is a necessary correlation between people's social positioning and the meanings they generate. This introduces a potential tension into the circuit, between the meaning encoded at the point of production (which necessarily bears the imprint of dominant ideology) and the meanings decoded at the point of reception by viewers whose social location may position them against that ideology. Viewing television thus involves negotiation between reader and text, with some readings being preferred but no reading being imposed. Hall offered three generalized reading strategies for characterizing viewers: dominant (the reader agrees with and accepts the dominant



ideology); negotiated (the reader accepts the dominant ideology for the most part but has to customize it to fit her local circumstance); and oppositional (the reader opposes the dominant ideology).

Obvious problems exist with the model (why only three reading strategies? How do we know which readings are preferred? Do oppositional readings matter in the real world or only in readers' heads?) and, naturally, the notion of the active, resisting audience can be carried too far, especially if presumptions of semiotic resistance are accorded great social or political significance. The main contribution of the encoding/decoding approach was to provide theoretical justification for conceptualizing television audiences differently: not as an irrational mass manipulated by ideology on the one hand, and not as an assemblage of rational individuals strategically consuming media for identifiable and measurable reasons on the other, but rather as complex, messy subjects embedded in cultures and communities. Dayan (2001, p. 748) aptly describes it as 'a framework that abandons individual psychology and the study of the structural coherence of a text to concentrate on the nature of the relationship between text and reader'. He outlines four main assumptions of the framework: (1) the meaning of a text is not pre-given but is produced in the context of reception; (2) the analyst does not have privileged knowledge of the text; (3) readers/viewers are varied, as are contexts of reception; and (4) meanings, rather than the text itself or the industrial system that produces it, are the starting point for the study of 'effects' (p. 749). Texts and anthologies devoted to the study of television and its audiences testify to the centrality of this perspective (see Allen, 1987; Fiske, 1987; Seiter, 1990; Morley, 1992; Hay et al., 1996; Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998; Newcomb, 2000; Tulloch, 2000; Gorton, 2009; Briggs, 2010; Seiter et al., 2013).

In television audience scholarship, the contours of reception continue to shift as more studies are carried out and more types and levels of context are considered. One strand of

reception study has focused on viewer interpretations of specific programs, genres or sets of programs (Morley, 1980; Hobson, 1982; Ang, 1985; Liebes and Katz, 1990; Livingstone, 1990; Jhally and Lewis, 1992; D'Acci, 1994; Livingstone and Lunt, 1994; Gripsrud, 1995; Manga, 2003; Hill, 2005; Skeggs and Wood, 2012; Sender 2012). Liebes and Katz (1990), for example, asked groups of people from five different cultures to watch and discuss the prime-time soap opera *Dallas*, revealing the importance of distinct national/cultural repertoires to interpretations of the show. Jhally and Lewis (1992) interviewed viewers of *The Cosby Show* and concluded, among other things, that the program encouraged 'enlightened racism'. Press (1991) and Manga (2003) explored class differences among women viewers of prime-time programming and daytime talk shows respectively, while Hill (2005), Skeggs and Wood (2012) and Sender (2012) all focus their attention on viewers of reality television.

A second strand of reception research examines the broader domestic (and sometimes public) contexts of television use/consumption in everyday life (Hobson, 1982; Morley, 1986; Palmer, 1986; Lull, 1990; Gray, 1992; Buckingham, 1993; Brown, 1994; Gillespie, 1995; Gauntlett and Hill, 1999; Lembo, 2000; McCarthy, 2001; Fisherkeller, 2002; Bird, 2003; Mayer, 2003). This work examines who watches television, the various conditions under which watching occurs (when, where, why, how), and how television use intersects and overlaps with other aspects of daily life. Topics include the gendered use of technology within the family (Morley, 1986; Gray, 1992), the unique ways that children relate to television (Palmer, 1986; Buckingham, 1993), the sociality of television use among people of different occupational backgrounds (Lembo, 2000), the deployment/reception of television in public settings such as waiting rooms, airports, bars and retail spaces (McCarthy, 2001), the use of television and video in building community and recreating cultural traditions across ethnic diasporas (Gillespie, 1995; Mayer, 2003), and the meanings and uses of

television culture in the lives of American adolescents as they play out in the varied contexts of family, school and peer group (FisherKeller, 2002).

Together with a limited subset of fan studies, this second strand is most often identified as ethnographic, despite the fact that extended interviews and short-term encounters with specific groups or individuals are more common than is sustained fieldwork within a culture or community (FisherKeller [2002] is a notable exception). As Lotz (2000) reminds us, classifying one's object of study as an 'audience' versus a 'culture' remains a key difference between media studies and anthropology when investigating media consumption. Classic ethnographic immersion is more easily accomplished in the relatively bounded spaces of television production (e.g. Grindstaff, 2002) than reception, reception being a more fluid, geographically dispersed and privatized phenomenon (see Radway, 1988; Morley and Silverstone, 1990; Moores, 1993; Ang, 1996; Seiter, 1999). Not only is it difficult to hang out in people's homes (or cars or offices or dorm rooms) and watch them watch/use television, but television use cannot easily be separated from the rest of everyday life, as it unfolds either on- or off-line. In the words of Ang (1996, p. 68) "watching TV" is no more than a short-hand label for a wide variety of multi-dimensional behaviors and experiences implicated in the practices of television consumption ... [consequently] it becomes difficult to demarcate when we are not part of the television audience'. This dilemma is only magnified in the contemporary media environment by the dispersion of television texts across multiple mediums and platforms.

### **FANS AND FANDOMS: THE PARTICIPATORY AUDIENCE**

Studies of fans and fandoms partially sidestep the problem of how to locate the when and where of television consumption because

fans often create and sustain self-consciously identified communities and subcultures. The study of fans has been one of the signature contributions of media studies generally and reception studies specifically. This is because, in part, fans crystallize both what is concerning and what is promising about television consumption in the modern era. According to Jensen (1992), early critics saw fans as lonely, isolated individuals whose affinity to a media figure or text is either pathetic (the fan as nerd or geek) or dangerous (the fan as psychopath), or a member of a hysterical crowd (the screaming/fainting Beatles fan) or uncontrolled mob (drunken, destructive soccer hooligans). All four tropes, Jensen argues, reflect anxieties about the decline of local familial and community-based ties and their substitution by impersonal, mediated forms of sociability. On the more optimistic side, scholars recognized the promise of active, creative, 'producerly' engagement with media texts for the purposes of building new forms of community – the dominant characterization of fans that held sway in what Gray et al. (2007) call the 'fandom is beautiful' phase of fan studies.

The analytic framework for this initial phase of fan studies came from French anthropologist Michele de Certeau via Henry Jenkins. De Certeau's theory of 'poaching' offered media scholars a way of understanding fan activity as productive and participatory within an overall context of inequality and institutional marginalization (de Certeau, 1984). As peasants and not proprietors in the media landscape, the power of fans is the power of appropriation and consumption rather than production, even as consumption is understood to have a productive dimension. According to de Certeau, there corresponds to the rationalized, spectacular production of the culture industries another type of production, called 'consumption'. Consumption is 'devious' and 'disperse', he says, '... it insinuates itself everywhere, silently and almost invisibly ... it does not manifest itself through its own products, but rather through its ways of using the products imposed by a dominant economic

order (1984, p. xii). The power of appropriation doesn't level the playing field; there is no equivalence in the production-consumption relation. Rather, poaching articulates a struggle over meaning that both reflects and constitutes unequal power relations in late modernity.

De Certeau usefully distinguishes between strategies and tactics to reinforce this point. Strategists are the people who get to make and enforce the rules; they have institutional power. They are the politicians, the lawmakers, the policymakers, the CEOs, the educators, the movie moguls and television producers – they are the cultural capitalists, or what Fiske (1989) calls 'the power bloc'. Tacticians, on the other hand, are producers with a small 'p'. Lacking an institutional power base, they are the ones for whom the rules are made. Their power is the power of appropriation, of making do with what they have. Tactics are thus more ephemeral and fleeting; as de Certeau would say, they are opportunities 'seized on the wing' (1984, p. xix) by those 'already caught in the nets of "discipline"' (p. xv). To the extent that the average person's relationship to the culture industries is on the consumption rather than the production side of the equation, we are all tacticians rather than strategists – we don't own the land, but we can poach on it and potentially recraft it to better suit our interests and desires.

Henry Jenkins (1992) famously applied these ideas in his study of *Star Trek* (and other media) fans in his now-classic book *Textual Poachers*. Jenkins saw fandom as a particularly good example of poaching because fans were both persistent and inventive in their efforts to reclaim media imagery for themselves. Fans refuse the high-culture mode of reception in which audiences are expected to be passive and worshipful, maintaining a distance between artist and audience. For Jenkins, this refusal to pay homage to authorial control is important because it challenges the ability of media producers to determine the creation and circulation of meanings: once characters become part of popular discourse they become the property

of the fans who fantasize about them, not of the industry executives who produce and merchandise them. In this formulation, fandom goes beyond being a regular viewer of a favorite program because it translates viewing into some kind of cultural activity: sharing thoughts and opinions with others, joining a community of fans with common interests, even generating original art work, poems, novels, screenplays, zines and videos. Indeed, some fan activities go beyond poaching in that people not only poach on the property of others, they make their own property, their own productions. 'Fans possess not simply borrowed remnants snatched from mass culture, but their own culture built from the semiotic raw materials the media provides' (Jenkins, 1992, p. 49).

Television fans thus differ from other categories of viewers because they approximate what Dayan (2001) calls a 'public' rather than merely an 'audience'. In Dayan's view, reception studies in the reader-response or text-reader tradition, although an improvement over earlier effects models of research, nevertheless create the audience as an artifact of the method; in eliciting statements that viewers would never make if not for the provocation of the researcher, and in analyzing reactions whose nature is typically private and non-discursive, scholars incorporate viewers into an invented discourse that would not otherwise exist. Ethnographic studies of viewers as 'interpretive communities' only partially resolve this problem. Unlike an audience, a public, according to Dayan (2001), has a milieu that sustains sociability, a self-reflexive sense of itself as a public, and the capacity for self-representation. For Dayan (2001), 'true' publics do not form around a medium (television or any other), but in relation to a social problem and with respect to other publics. That being said, he sees fandoms as approximating publics. He considers them to be 'quasi-publics', excluding them from full-fledged membership because they are, in his words, 'ephemeral' and 'non-serious', focused on mimicry and play rather than real socio-political issues (Dayan, 2001, p. 752).

Setting aside this problematic re-inscription of the very cultural hierarchies that fandom works to challenge (high/low, serious/trivial, information/entertainment, etc.), we can see that the first wave of fan studies, of which *Textual Poachers* was a part, varied in topic and focus but generally confirmed the image of fans as active consumers who worked within and against commercial culture to create media publics (see Bacon-Smith, 1992; Lewis, 1992; Harrington and Bielby, 1995; Tulloch and Jenkins, 1995; Penley, 1997). Gray et al. (2007) note that these studies do not so much deconstruct the binary in which fans are positioned as 'other' to the 'normal' (detached) media consumer, as attempt to differently value the fan's place in the binary. Valuing fans differently does not mean projecting onto them oppositional tendencies, of course, and for the most part scholars have avoided this. As Jenkins (1992) reminds us, not all readings are oppositional, not all readers are resistant, and not all resistance is progressive; for the most part, fans gravitate toward particular media texts (presumably inflected with dominant ideology) because of some compatibility or affinity between the text and fans' pre-existing cultural beliefs and commitments. Some studies in fact, revealed how fan activity works to maintain rather than challenge existing systems of classification and thus existing cultural and social hierarchies (see Thornton, 1995; Harris and Alexander, 1998; Jancovich, 2002; Jancovich et al., 2003).

For Gray et al. (2007), the chief shortcoming of early fan studies is not its celebratory tone, although there is some of that, but its tendency to exclude from systematic study the most common or typical exemplar of fandom – the person who loves a show, watches it religiously and talks about it enthusiastically, but does not otherwise engage in fan activities. In other words, there is a bias toward organized, active, highly-visible groups or subcultures (for an important exception, see Harrington and Bielby, 1995). Subsequent studies began to right this imbalance, situating organized fandom on a continuum from regular viewing to amateur content-production and widening

the field of fan studies to encompass greater conceptual, theoretical and methodological diversity (see Barker and Brooks, 1998; Adden, 1999; Brooker, 2002; Hills, 2002; Thomas, 2002; Juluri 2003; Sandvoss, 2003, 2005).

Arguably, the new media environment has made fandom more relevant than ever before. Far from existing on the fringe of media consumption, the DIY practices associated with fandom have emerged as central features of television and media consumption in the digital age. In *Convergence Culture*, Jenkins (2006) describes a moment when 'fans are central to how culture operates ... the concept of the active audience, so controversial two decades ago, is now taken for granted by everyone involved in and around the media industry' (2006, p. 1). Media companies act differently today – generating new kinds of content and forming new relationships with consumers – because they have been shaped by the increasing visibility of participatory culture, once associated primarily with fandom (Jenkins, 2006, 2007; Jenkins et al., 2013). For Jenkins, the interactive audience of participatory media culture is more than a marketing concept and less than a democracy: media industries have to accommodate the interests of consumers even as they seek to bend consumers to their interests (Jenkins, 2006). In his afterward to the anthology *Fandom* edited by Gray et al. (2007), Jenkins argues we should avoid celebrating a process that commodifies fan cultural production and sells it back to us, but we must also acknowledge new trends that make companies more responsive to committed consumers and that extend the influence fans exert over the media to wider publics (2007, p. 362). We are witnessing a new kind of cultural power, he says, 'as fans bond together within larger knowledge communities, pool their information, shape each other's opinions, and develop a greater self-consciousness about their shared agendas and common interests' (p. 363). Likening these new knowledge communities to 'collective bargaining units for consumers', he speculates that 'as fandom becomes part of the normal way the creative industries operate,

then fandom may cease to function as a meaningful category of analysis' (p. 364).

## CONCLUSION

The new media environment, characterized by digitalization, convergence, choice, interactivity, intertextuality and extraterritoriality, presents both opportunities and challenges for the study of television and television audiences. As Livingstone (2004) aptly notes, it turns out that the 'television' of media theory was a temporary, particularistic phenomenon and not a timeless, universal one; scholars have mostly attended to mass-broadcast, non-interactive television along with the sit-on-the-couch domestic audience. Today, in the post-network era, television is present in multiple locations and on multiple platforms not only in the home but in all manner of public and private spaces; it is used not only for entertainment/leisure but for surveillance and social control; it allows people to watch their favorite shows but also shop, bank, vote, and shift programming to the internet; people not only receive television via cable, satellite and the internet, they carry it around on cell phones, tablets and personal video recorders (PDVs) – breathing new life into Raymond Williams' characterization of viewing as a form of 'mobile privatization' (Williams, 1974) and prompting Grindstaff and Turow (2006) to prefer the term 'video cultures' to 'television'.

The economic, industrial and technological changes in the production and distribution of television are more easily documented and better understood than are commensurate changes in reception and use. To quote Spigel (2004: 6), 'as images multiply on a variety of delivery systems and platforms, who knows what audiences are seeing – much less thinking – any more'. The challenge for audience studies of television is understanding *how* people are engaging with video cultures (contexts, patterns and practices of reception), *why* people watch/use/interact with these cultures (to what purposes), and *what* people are

watching, in terms of the meanings television/video texts convey, given the varied and multiple modes of engagement. For exploring the *how* question, Lotz (2009) sees three developments as key: (1) the emergence of 'on demand' technologies, which represent a fundamental break from the programming schedules of the network era; (2) the existence of extradomestic viewing contexts, which free programming from the TV set in the living room; and (3) the increasingly individualized organization of the medium's use – made possible largely by digitization and cross-platform delivery. The *why* and *what* questions are proving more difficult to study in a qualitative manner. Simply tracking the programs or genres people watch, or monitoring discrete, user actions such as clicking, linking, liking or favoriting do not tell us much about interpretive processes at work or how the very meaning of television/video texts might hinge on their context of use. More promising are online spaces that encourage viewer commentary, response and discussion because such spaces potentially tell us something about what some viewers think, even as the form of communication shapes its expression. User actions from 'liking' to 'commenting' do indicate activity – and interactivity, of a sort – but within frameworks established by the classificatory systems being deployed. As Jean Burgess and Joshua Green (2009) note in their analysis of YouTube (without doubt one of the key new-media sites for watching TV/video), the different ways of measuring the popularity of videos posted on YouTube – 'most viewed', 'most responded', 'most discussed', 'most favorited' – constitute different versions of what YouTube is, and what it is for.

Lotz (2009) reminds us that the extradomestic and individualized use of TV has not entirely replaced older modes of viewing, rather old and new coexist. Moreover, even within the new-media environment, there is a blend of old and new content. Burgess and Green (2009) call attention to the existence of 'two YouTubes' – the YouTube consisting of user-generated content (garage-band music

videos, home movies, fan-generated mash-ups of favorite programs and characters, vlogs and user-generated news and information) and the YouTube consisting of traditional media content (clips and occasionally whole episodes from news and entertainment programming, trailers for television shows and Hollywood films, advertisements, sporting events, etc.). In reality, the two versions co-exist and collide (not always harmoniously, as lawsuits over copyright indicate), but the larger point is that Web 2.0 applications and digital platforms for ‘television’ are not free from commercial pressures and industrial participation and indeed represent new opportunities for industrial colonization. Although user-generated content exceeded traditional-media generated content on YouTube by a slight margin at the time when Burgess and Green conducted their research in 2006–2007, the overall trend since then, predictably, is toward commercial use (see Kim, 2012). At the same time, the patterns of use revealed by the popularity measures on YouTube suggest important differences in viewer/user engagement. Whereas the ‘most viewed’ category was dominated by traditional-media content, the ‘most responded’ and ‘most-discussed’ categories were dominated by user-generated content, indicating that although viewers are certainly watching ‘television’ on YouTube, they are also using the site to view, respond to and discuss other content that is not commercially – or industrially – generated (Burgess and Green, 2009). And since responding and commenting are themselves forms of content production, it’s fair to say user-generated content begets more user-generated content at higher rates than does traditional-media content. In other words, users appear more interested in and willing to engage in a participatory and producerly way with other users, as would be predicted by fan studies.

This blurring of production and use/consumption, what Axel Bruns (2008) calls ‘produsage’, is characteristic of the new media era, although its prevalence can be over-stated. Acknowledging the importance of the blurring

does, however, push back against the tendency to valorize new media only for its productive capacity. Burgess and Green (2011) as well as Jenkins et al. (2013) caution against recreating a hierarchy in which production is the ultimate goal and consumption its poor relation. In the words of Burgess and Green (2011, p. 82), ‘continuing to value only those who produce replicates the politics of the previous system. It’s important to consider the possibility that forms of participation requiring original content creation are potentially less inclusive than forms of participation that combine a range of modes of engagement’. That being said, however one counts participation, there is still the problem of what Jenkins et al. (2013) call ‘the participation gap’. In describing our culture as becoming more participatory over time, we’re speaking in relative and not absolute terms, they remind us. Even if we value, in the spirit of de Certeau, consumption as part of and not separate from production, we do not live in a society where communicative capacity is equally distributed. ‘Insofar as the [capacity] to meaningfully participate ... [is] linked to educational and economic opportunities, then the struggle over the right to participation is linked to core issues of social justice and equality’ (Jenkins et al., 2013, p. 194). This seems to me the underlying issue at stake in any consideration of how and why people consume television, whether the ‘television’ under consideration is old or new, broadcast or narrowcast, fragmented or unified, celebrated or condemned. Media consumption differs from the consumption of other goods and services precisely because media texts are symbol systems that connect interior and exterior worlds, and as such they enable and constrain the production and circulation of meaning, and even our very imaginations.

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