The Study of Media Audiences
Handbook

BSc Communications, Media & Society
Course Description
A popular view of mass media audiences renders them “couch potatoes” who passively consume whatever media fare is placed in their lap. Underpinning such a view of the audience are long standing assumptions that the mass of ordinary people are “cultural dopes” unable to resist the pervasive power of media. Challenging this thinking, others have argued for a more celebratory view of the media audience. Thus, in place of a naive and vulnerable audience (in the singular) we encounter audiences (in the plural) who are able to resist media power in creative, pleasurable and meaningful ways. These conflicting accounts of the media audience(s) take us to the heart of issues concerning e.g. the impact of media ‘effects’. Yet despite decades of mass communication research there is little agreement on the nature and extent of mass media influence. To this can be added the problem of defining who or what are media audiences? And how do we study their behaviour? Should we aim to understand the individual differences, or search for human universals? Or maybe a combination of all of the above? The course will build on interdisciplinary work on media audiences in order to develop a critical interest in our own personal and collective relationship with media forms.

Course Aims
The aim of this one semester course is to provide an introductory guide to important theoretical and methodological concerns that have influenced audience studies alongside some of the seminal work on the persuasive power of media. More specifically, it aims:

1. To provide an overview of the development of research about audiences from the beginning of the twentieth century to the present;
2. To consider changing approaches to understanding media audiences alongside changing views of society;
3. To explore the debates surrounding mass media power and influence; and
4. To introduce research carried out by media academics to understand audiences.

Course Objectives
By the end of the module, the student should be able to demonstrate:

- knowledge and understanding of theoretical approaches to the study of media audiences;
- knowledge and understanding of media audiences within a socio-historical context;
- an ability to critically analyse a range of theories and approaches to media influence and power

Assessment
1. 40% of the marks for this course come from the coursework assignments (2x1500-2000 word essays),
2. 50% from an examination at the end of the module (2 hours)
3. 10% from a seminar presentation.
Essay Questions

Draw on at least two theorists, not listed in the core readings of this module in your answer for each question.

1. Examine the theoretical and methodological problems associated with viewing the media in terms of effects? Discuss in relevance to research.
2. Discuss the concept of “powerful media” as developed by the mass audience theory. In which assumptions is it based? What has been its contribution to the development of media audiences’ research?
3. What is the contribution of ‘cultural indicators’ research to our understanding of the media-audience relationship? How relevant is it today?
4. ‘Media violence is a significant cause of social violence.’ Discuss this statement and make a case for whether it is true or false.
5. What do scholars within the Cultural Studies tradition mean when they say that media audiences are active? In which ways can audiences be active? Discuss with reference to research.
6. Develop, discuss and critique the role of the everyday context in media consumption. How does the home environment affect the activities and interpretations of media audiences?
7. What is the significance of the commercial measuring and tracking of the audiences in the overall academic study of the audiences? Discuss with reference to research.
8. In what ways are race and ethnicity significant in the production and/or consumption of media messages?
9. How has knowledge of ‘fandom’ and fan activities have contributed to our understanding of media audiences? Discuss with reference to research.
10. Drawing on relevant research critically discuss how new media have blurred the lines between media consumers and producers.

Key Texts

Syllabus

Week by week overview of topics:

Week 1 - Introduction to Media Audiences
Week 2 - Early Audience Research – The Effects Tradition
Week 3 - The scary world of television: Cultural Indicators & Cultivation theory
Week 4 - From Screen Violence to Real Violence?
Week 5 - Cultural Studies and the Audience
Week 6 - The Audience at Home: Audience, Domesticity and Gender
Week 7 - Measuring Audiences: The Role of the Media Industry
Week 8 - Race, Identity and Media Consumption
Week 9 - Audiences, Fans and Fandom
Week 10 - New Media Audiences: Interactivity and Fragmentation
Week 1 - Introduction to Media Audiences

This lecture is a general introduction to various themes and issues that have influenced audience studies over the years. It aims to establish the study of media audiences in a wider historical and socio-cultural perspective.

Core Reading


Supplementary Reading


Week 2 - Early Audience Research – The Effects Tradition

This lecture focuses on early perspectives concerning mass society and mass media culture. In doing so, a number of well-established traditions in mass communication research are introduced. It also identifies the principal routes via which media and communications studies have approached the long-standing question of media ‘influence’ and ‘effects’.

Core Reading


Supplementary Reading


Week 3 - The scary world of television: Cultural Indicators & Cultivation theory

This session introduces the theory and methodology of cultural indicators research. The work of George Gerbner and his associates on the effects of television audience attitudes, beliefs and behaviour offers a comprehensive counter to the discourse of effects research.

Core Reading


Supplementary Reading


**Week 4 - From Screen Violence to Real Violence?**

One of the most debated and investigated topics in communications and media is the question of the effects of screen violence. Does media violence contribute towards social violence? This lecture will question the direct correlation between the two by assessing the research undertaken on this issue.

**Core Reading**


Supplementary Reading


7. Farrar, K. M., Krcmar, M., & Nowak, K. L. (2006) Contextual features of violent video games, mental models and aggression. *Journal of Communication*, 56(2), 387-405. [see also the references section of this paper which provides a list of other relevant published works]


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**Week 5 - Cultural Studies and the Audience**

This lecture explores the relationship between media representations and the interpretations of the audience. It aims to introduce cultural studies’ "challenge" to the study of mass media audiences.

**Core Reading**


**Supplementary Reading**


The Audience at Home: Audience, Domesticity and Gender

This lecture looks at the most important aspects of media use in the home environment. How gender, domestic leisure and family viewing affect media consumption.

Core Reading


Supplementary Reading


Week 7 - Measuring Audiences: The Role of the Media Industry

This session explores the ways in which the broadcasting industry measures and tracks its audiences and looks at the kinds of knowledge these practices produce. It will also consider the academic theories about the industry’s view of the audience. Do the media deliver audiences to advertisers? Are the media slaves to audience ratings?

Core Reading


Supplementary Reading


**Week 8 - Race, Identity and Media Consumption**

In this lecture we look at the impact of race on audience’s consumption and interpretations of media output, applying the different paradigms. This lecture will consider the ways in which one’s race or ethnic background might impact on media interpretation.
Core Reading


Supplementary Reading


### Week 9 - Audiences, Fans and Fandom

In this lecture we will discuss the history and evolution of fandom and celebrity culture. We will apply the different media paradigms to come to an understanding of why humans have craved for fame and discuss how celebrity culture has not only taken over media productions, but the audience as well. From being considered as dysfunctional and antisocial, fans are now characterised as active and creative. This lecture examines the pleasures of being an 'adoring audience', looking at fan behaviour from within the different paradigms.

**Core Reading**


Supplementary Reading


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**Week 10 - New Media Audiences: Interactivity and Fragmentation**

This lecture examines the role that new information and communication technologies are playing in re-shaping our understanding of media audiences and the extent to which it is replacing or complementing the audience for traditional communications media. Now that audiences can also be producers of content through blogs, wikis and their own home pages, what does such a change signal mean for understanding audiences, media effects and the very notion of a ‘mass media’?

**Core Reading**


Supplementary Reading


Assessment Anonymity
All assessed work, i.e., assessed essays and examinations are marked anonymously.

Submission Of Assessed Essays
You must sign a submission form to confirm that the essays you have handed in are your own work and that you have acknowledged all your sources.

Presentations and essay questions
These can be on the same topic, but NOT using the same material. We recommend a different topic, which will help when preparing for exams.

Extensions
Requests for extensions will only be considered if supported by medical or other evidence of extenuating circumstances.

In order to maintain consistency, extensions for essays will only be granted by the Course Tutor. However, in certain personal circumstances, students may feel that they want to approach their personal tutor for an extension. In such cases the personal tutor will discuss the situation with the course tutor who will then decide if whether an extension should be granted.

Please note extensions CANNOT be granted retrospectively.

Late Submission Of Assessed Essays
Late submission of essays and presentations, unless supported by medical certificates, or notes from personal tutors, will be penalised. The penalties are as follows:

- A penalty of 10% of the available marks for the written work should be imposed upon the expiry of the deadline
- A penalty of 5% of the available marks should then be imposed on each of the ten subsequent working days
- ‘Available marks’ in this context means the maximum marks available for the piece of work (for example, 100 would be the available mark in a percentage marking scheme, 20 would be the available mark in a 1-20 marking scheme)
- ‘Working day’ in this context means a period of twenty four hours or part thereof from Monday to Friday inclusive
- Once submitted, no additional material will be accepted after the deadline

Computer Problems
Experiencing problems with computers does not count as a legitimate reason for late submission of work. It is your responsibility to allow yourself plenty of time in case problems occur.

Employment Problems
Employment related problems do not count as a legitimate reason for late submission of work.
Return Of Work From Staff
Staff will normally endeavour to provide feedback on essays within four working weeks of their submission. All feedback will be sent by e-mail. Essays will not be returned.