Introduction

In this unit I will explore one of the younger traditions in mass communication research which is sometimes called the New Audience Research. The defining characteristic of this New Audience Research is that it is ethnographic in orientation. It is difficult to give an exact date at which this new tradition was born but most would agree that the wheels were set in motion by the mid 1980s. Its roots go back much further. The three historical backgrounds of the ethnographic turn explored in this unit, which to some extent have merged in present-day research, go back to the mid 1970s. I present these backgrounds from my own postmodern-feminist perspective (which I will introduce in section 2).

Many of the issues addressed in this unit are also discussed in chapters 5, 15 and 16 of McQuail's Mass Communication Theory (5th edition) (McQuail, 2005) which you may find helpful as relevant background reading. If you are interested in pursuing further some of the issues presented in this unit, you might want to browse in cultural and media studies journals such as Cultural Studies, the European Journal of Cultural Studies, the International Journal of Cultural Studies or the Journal of Communication Inquiry, as well as in the major academic journals in mass communication which from time to time have articles about ethnographic media research (Critical Studies in Mass Communication, Media Culture and Society, the European Journal of Communication, Journal of Communication) or journals that are interdisciplinary but lean more towards a humanities perspective (Screen, Journal of Popular Culture, Discourse).

1. `The New Audience Research' in Media Studies

And then there was `the New Audience Research'... Roughly from the mid 1980s onward there is a more or less sudden increase in qualitative audience studies in mass communication research. This increase is sometimes referred to as the `ethnographic turn' in media research because the key studies involved have all been inspired by a particular tradition of anthropological research called interpretive ethnography. Traditional social anthropology involved a researcher living amidst a `foreign' or `native' community and studying the life of that community as `the other', applying to it a range of `scientifically-validated' methods and concepts to do with language, kinship systems, systems of production and so on. But interpretive ethnography, by contrast, seeks to see the world as it is seen and experienced by the participants themselves, and does not disguise the role of the researcher. This approach, applied to media audiences, has been called `New Audience Research' (see Corner, 1991).
The New Audience Research covers a wide range of subjects. It refers amongst other things to studies of romance reading, television viewing, and how we make sense of the news. The definitive characteristic of these studies is that they actively invite those who read romances or watch television to present their own point of view in lengthy, open interviews or in the course of 'participant observation' - see p.172 of Communication, Cultural and Media Studies: The Key Concepts (3rd Edition) (Hartley, J., 2002).

This approach is sometimes associated with political ideals: it is seen as a more open and democratic procedure than to hand questionnaires to viewers and readers which do not allow them to use their own words. Many different research traditions have advocated qualitative research methods such as in depth interviewing or participant observation. Not all of them, however, were motivated by a critical or political agenda, nor did they necessarily lead to reflection on or critique of existing power relations. In the words of a famous anthropologist, interpretive ethnography can provide a means "for different peoples to form complex concrete images of one another; as well as of the relationships of knowledge and power that connect them" (Clifford, 1988:23). Such a form of ethnography ideally allows for dialogue or even polylogue among those coming from different cultures or cultural backgrounds and for a redressing of intercultural power relations (Marcus and Fischer, 1986). However, even in interpretive ethnography the researcher retains considerable power: the power of choice of research topic or focus, power of selection of which parts of which transcriptions or observations should be included in the research write-up or commentary, power of interpretation of their significance and power over the means and style of distribution of the research findings. In this respect interpretive ethnography is similar to other research traditions.

Ien Ang's study of watching Dallas, the American prime time soap opera is a classic example of the New Audience Research (Ang, 1985). Ang invited readers of the Dutch women's magazine Viva to write to her about their Dallas viewing experience. "I like watching the TV serial Dallas but often get odd reactions to it. Would anyone like to write and tell me why you like watching it too, or dislike it? I should like to assimilate these reactions in my university thesis. Please write to ..." (1985, p.10). She received 42 letters, most of them from women. Based on these letters Ang reconstructs what kind of pleasures watching Dallas offers for these Dutch viewers. Her goal was not simply to describe how viewers make sense of and find pleasure in watching Dallas, she also wanted to intervene in the then fierce debate in the Netherlands and in other European countries about the `cultural imperialism' of American television shows as well as take a stand against the often denigrating views of popular culture and its users.

Through qualitative method, inspired by ethnography, Ien Ang was able to access audience pleasures in viewing Dallas (and hating Dallas), and to identify how the dominant ideology of mass culture and its populist counterpart organise social debate and individual evaluation of popular culture (even if they cannot determine audience pleasure in itself). Ang's choice to work with readers' letters also has a second political dimension. She helped to establish a new, more radical forum for feminist interest in popular culture, women's genres and women readers. The feminist work on popular culture at that time consisted primarily of text-based analysis. An often-quoted example is Tania Modleski's collection Loving With a Vengeance: Mass-produced Fantasies for Women ([1982] 1984, in which Modleski analyses what makes romances, gothic novels and soap opera so attractive for female audiences.

Modleski combines her decoding of the narrative structure of romances, gothic novels and soap opera with psycho-analytical and clinical psychological views. As a result some critics see her work as ultimately contradicting its own goals. Instead of generating respect for female audiences she stigmatizes them as hysterics (romance readers) or stereotypes them as housewives (soap opera) whose distracted frame of mind, said to be crucial to their efficient functioning, fits appropriately with the structure of day-time television soap operas, a
characteristic of which are their multiple and fragmented plotlines. Modleski’s text-based analysis was challenged by a group of researchers who, following Ang, chose to work with the accounts of viewers themselves. Ellen Seiter, Hans Borchers, Gabrielle Kreutzner and Eva-Maria Warth (1989), using in-depth interviews, came to very different conclusions regarding the spectator position Modleski used as the basis for her text analysis.

Modleski speaks of the position of the ‘ideal mother’ to explain the high number of close-ups (the mother’s privileged contact with the emotions of her family) but also to explain how women watch day-time soap opera. “Like the ideal mother in the home, we are kept interested in a number of events at once and are denied the luxury of a total and prolonged absorption” (1984, p.101). Seiter, Borchers, Kreutzner and Warth dismantle this position as very much a middle-class position of which their working-class informants were critical (1989, p241). Likewise their informants did not despise ‘the villainess’ as a negative image of their own ideal selves (Modleski’s interpretation), but admired her for her guts. They tended to ‘hate’ what they called ‘the whiners’ or the ‘wimpy women’ (1989, p.238).

Even though it can be seductive to look for similarities between the narrative structure of media texts and everyday life, such a procedure abstracts too much from the complexities of everyday life. To understand how popular genres have meaning for audiences it is crucial to take the social context in which they are used into account. Analysis based only on the text raises difficult questions about the status of the researcher. Is she the enlightened expert? Can she, contrary to the women she describes, withstand the enticements of the text? Modleski’s analysis sets her apart from the people she writes about. Compare this to Ang’s invitation to Dallas viewers to write her about their experiences: “I like watching ... Dallas, but often get odd reactions to it”. Ang’s position is totally different. Her ‘authority’ is of a more ‘dialogical’ nature, in tune with ethnographic work.

The New Audience Research differs from various other traditions that have similar research objects or use similar methods:

- although the New Audience Research is a type of audience research, its practitioners have a firm preference for qualitative over quantitative method which they believe allows them to do justice to the social contexts in which the media are used;
- contrary to mainstream mass communication research, the New Audience Research often prioritizes respect for cultures or cultural backgrounds that are marginalised by the dominant culture and by mainstream research traditions;
- its research object is usually popular culture, which includes both fiction and news genres; the New Audience Research is more political or ‘critical’ than is popular culture research within such traditions as American Studies or English Literature (in as far as they accommodate popular culture at all);
- interactive research methods (interviews or participant observation) are preferred over text analytical methods;
- the political agenda of the New Audience Research is often a feminist agenda (although there is no reason why the methods of such research cannot be applied to a much broader agenda).

**Activity One (Allow 20 minutes)**

Read chapter 68 by Ang in Boyd-Barrett and Newbold, 1995, Approaches to Media. Take brief notes. What do you consider to be the defining features of Ang’s approach?

**Comment**

I consider that the important features of Watching Dallas are that it:
uses text and definitions of *Dallas* viewers themselves
has critical (or political) goals regarding the (low) status of popular culture, the question of cultural imperialism and feminism
and that Ang analyses *Dallas* as an involved cultural critic and consumer of the programme rather than as an outsider. Traditional ethnography would have discouraged this on the grounds that the researcher might be 'biased': in interpretive ethnography a feeling of involvement is seen as facilitating access to the feelings and meanings of others.

2. Histories of the Ethnographic Turn

2.1 Feminism and postmodernism

To fully understand the background of the New Audience Research it is necessary to describe two major intellectual developments that took place in the early and mid 1980s. The first is the academic recognition of feminism and women's studies as integral parts of a critical research practice. The second is the growing popularity of postmodernism. Both developments are intertwined with the histories of particular research traditions. In the case of the New Audience Research these traditions are (1) British or European cultural studies, (2) American cultural studies and (3) the empirical sociological tradition in mass communication research. Ien Ang's *Dallas* study (*Watching Dallas*: Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination, (1985)) relates to all these traditions and I will use it as a point of departure for my discussion of feminism and postmodernism.

Ien Ang's *Dallas* study was a double intervention in debates about culture and cultural value. The implicit claim of her work was that popular genres - and women's genres at that! - were worthy of academic interest. She claimed that popular culture had merits of its own and that *Dallas* viewers were individuals who had views and ideas that were interesting to find out about. She also intervened in the feminist debate over popular culture to say that so-called traditional representations of femininity were neither as one dimensional as feminist criticism then claimed them to be nor as unfeminist.

Feminism basically claims equal rights and respect for women and for what is deemed feminine. The women's movement struggled for women's right to vote at the beginning of this century and for wider recognition of women's rights and cultural contributions. As a result of this struggle women gained much wider entrance to universities and to academic research. As academics, feminists aimed and aim to demystify the mechanisms that accord evaluative gender stereotypes to human beings as well as to types of work or to such things as popular culture genres. Feminist cultural critics in the 1970s, still a marginal academic group, also wondered why gender stereotypes and stereotypically feminine preferences and genres held such attraction for women. Their explicit interest in women's popular genres marks the beginning of the widespread interest in popular culture in the 1980s.

The first explanations these feminist critics came up with to explain the popularity of texts which, they believed, merely reinforced gender differences and inequalities was the appeal to the 'false consciousness' of the viewers. 'False consciousness' is a Marxist term that suggests that we are often not aware of what is in our own best (class) interest because we have been indoctrinated by the dominant ideology, one which only serves the interests of the ruling class. It soon became clear, however, that the pleasure which popular culture genres offered could not be explained nor annihilated by 'enlightening' their users. Despite our knowledge of what is supposedly good and what is bad for us, we can have fierce and inexplicable attachments to the 'wrong' kind of popular text. Cora Kaplan's (1986) essay on *The Thorn Birds* recounts how ashamed she was as a 14-year old child of progressive parents to be discovered reading (and
loving) the highly conservative and racist Gone with the Wind. Kaplan's shame and Ang's disturbance at the reactions she attracted to her fascination for Dallas ("I like watching ... Dallas but often get odd reactions to it") are only two examples of what made feminists critical of 'modernist theory'.

Modernist theory is based on 'Enlightenment' values. Such values include a belief in progress, in the rational individual, in High Culture and its ability to make us reflect on social relations, in the possibility of objective knowledge and in the discovery of universal social laws, just like there are natural laws. The work of influential thinkers such as Nietzsche, Freud, Lacan and Foucault has cast doubt on these values. Isn't all creation of knowledge ultimately dependent on the perspective and the cultural background of the thinker? Do not all of us have rational and irrational traits? Does it make sense to try to find universal social laws for situations that come into being under totally different social, historical and cultural circumstances? Is it true that popular culture is only an instrument of domination whereas elitist High Culture is a means of liberation, and if so for whom? Cora Kaplan's memory, for example, of finding pleasure in a text that she knew she should disapprove of, made her turn to Freud's discovery of the unconscious which explained that we are not totally in control of all of our feelings, desires and ambitions. Kaplan and other feminists' self-reflexive autobiographical accounts provided a bridge to the experiences of others and to a re-evaluation of popular culture. Although feminist popular culture criticism had started out from a highly critical position that disparaged the readers of women's magazines and romances (Friedan, 1963), interest in how others expressed their engagement with popular culture now came high on the agenda.

Ang's Dallas study is an example both of changing conceptions of feminist media criticism and also of the revaluation of popular culture, one of the hallmarks of postmodernism in media and cultural studies. Criticism of the universalist values of modernist theory entails strong commitment to understanding popular genres and media use in their social context, taking into account the historical and cultural specificity of such practices. The meanings which popular culture helps to generate for its users and the pleasures it offers came to be seen as locally produced by viewers and readers. The text, held in such high esteem in modernist literary criticism, was dethroned. Meaning, according to the postmodern point of view, was not the property of the text but the result of the interaction between reader and text. Moreover, this was supposed to be the case with all texts, not just with High Cultural ones. All texts were argued to be `polysemic' (Fiske, 1987), all texts contained potentially many meanings and it was up to the researcher to find out how audiences dealt with these possibilities for meaning production. The older point of view that texts were utterly powerful and could induce a false consciousness in their readers or viewers, was left behind.

The postmodern viewpoint in media and cultural studies has far-reaching consequences for research. The everyday use, pleasures and displeasures the media offer and that are made meaningful by audiences in specific contexts come to be important. Because meaning is understood to be locally produced, there is no need to search for universal laws. The distrust of 'the common people' that is built into survey research and that necessitated asking a question several times in slightly different ways to make sure that respondents are not lying, is made superfluous. Even if informants lie or present a more favourable view of themselves, the New Audience Research argues, they do so using the vocabularies and the frames of reference that are available to them and which begin to make clear how media texts and genres become meaningful to them. As David Morley put it, discussing his research of television viewing which is primarily based on interviews rather than on participant observation:

"(S)hould you wish to understand what I am doing, it would probably be as well to ask me. I may well, of course, lie to you or otherwise misrepresent my thoughts or feelings, for any number of purposes, but at least, through my verbal responses, you will begin to get some access to the kind of language, the criteria of distinction and the types of categorizations, through which I construct my (conscious) world" (Morley, 1989, p.25).
Broadly speaking, postmodern-feminist popular culture research became an important domain in which there was a keen interest in ethnographic method. Its practitioners originated from humanities and social science but their ethnographic work belonged to the European and American cultural studies traditions or the classical tradition of mass communication research. Their interests in ethnography were complex but also, at least partly, influenced by two major considerations. First, ethnography in one's own society is cheap research and well-suited to the needs of groups that have only just gained positions within the academy, who come low in the hierarchy and who cannot command large research funds. Second, as Kirsten Drotner (1994, p.342) suggests, ethnography was also useful for understanding the new and complex developments instigated by the women's movement and the emergence of the multicultural society. Thus new groups in the academy such as `ethnic studies' and `women's studies' chose to explore (cheap) ethnographic method. This feminist legacy, argued Drotner in an earlier piece, has often been ignored (1993, pp.33-34).

2.2 Three traditions

2.2.1 European cultural studies research

Although cultural studies as an academic, interdisciplinary practice that combines humanities and social research traditions originated at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) in Birmingham, England in the 1970s, nowadays properly speaking we should say `European' rather than British cultural studies research to make clear that there is a distinct European tradition that is different from the American cultural studies tradition and that is also different from the Australian and emerging Asian cultural studies traditions.

European cultural studies started within the Faculty of English at the University of Birmingham. Stuart Hall's famous `Encoding/Decoding' paper was a significant early example of the CCCS work (see below) (Hall [1973] 1980). It was some time before the Centre's interest in media and the use of ethnographic method actually came together in David Morley's hallmark Nationwide study in 1980. Shaun Moores points out in his impressive overview Interpreting Audiences: The Ethnography of Media Consumption that Morley's study of the television magazine Nationwide, which was based on a large number of group interviews, was in fact the first empirical ethnographic study that dealt with audiences (1993, p.6). The encoding/decoding model on which Morley based the interpretation of his Nationwide interviews rejected the textual determinism, in which the text was seen as the source of meaning rather than the interaction between texts and audiences, characteristic of the considerable interest in audiences preceding his study.


- Tests the encoding/decoding model which posits that viewers take up one of three positions (the dominant position, a negotiated view or an oppositional view), which can be understood as their relative distance from the preferred meaning encoded in the text. Their distance from the preferred meaning is supposed to be determined by their social class position.
- The study was based on interviews with 29 groups (of 5-10 people) which were comprised of schoolchildren, students (part-time and full-time in further and higher education), full and part-time trade union officials and managers from banking institutions. The groups were shown a Nationwide programme which was discussed (and tape-recorded) for approximately 30 minutes.

The essence of Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding essay is simple. It posits that television comes to have meaning at different moments: both as part of the production (or encoding) and as part
of the moment of reception (or decoding). Encoding and decoding are related but never identical. Since both are based in their own particular frameworks of knowledge and are formed by the relations of production and the technical infrastructure, they will necessarily be different and produce a related but different meaningful discourse in either production or viewing contexts. Hall goes on to distinguish three hypothetical viewer positions: (i) a dominant-hegemonic position, where the viewer decodes the message in terms of the reference code in which it has been encoded and thus follows the text's `preferred reading'; (ii) a negotiated position, which contains a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements and in which the viewer does not straightforwardly accept the text's `preferred reading' and (iii) an oppositional position in which the viewer strongly resists or outrightly rejects the `preferred reading' (Hall, 1980, pp.136-8). Morley's Nationwide study made clear that making a television text meaningful is actually more complex than is suggested by the encoding/decoding model and its three viewer positions. For one, Morley found that groups that had the same class position (Hall's relations of production) gave dissimilar interpretations (see Morley 1992, chapter 3 and 4). Nevertheless the encoding/decoding model still provides theoretical ground for the basic premise of `reception analysis' (a term by which media ethnographies are often referred to) which is that viewers are seen as active meaning producers. Their `readings' are the product of their social experiences and class position, and the range of cultural knowledge they have access to. The encoded `preferred meaning' of a text constrains possible readings but never totally controls them.

The `boom' in media ethnography occurred a little later, in the early 80s, at least partly inspired by CCCS work that was not itself focused on the media. All over Europe reception studies were started which, in the dialectical manner of these things, again inspired British researchers who worked or had worked at the Centre to continue and to start new work dealing with media audiences. Ien Ang's Dutch Dallas study (1985), is an example of a CCCS inspired study and one of the key texts of the period. Yet another key text is David Morley's Family Television (1986). An example of other European work on media audiences is Kirsten Drotner's research on Danish youngsters and video (Drotner, 1989). The parameters of qualitative empirical audience study were set in this period:

- contrary to earlier CCCS research and to critical mass communication research in general, gender came to occupy a place as important if not more important than the place of social class;
- there was a strong focus on popular culture rather than on, for example, avant-garde film (High Culture), or on working class culture or folklore;
- the social context of media use was seen as very important; whereas the properties of the media text itself were given less attention than in text-focused forms of analysis.

**Activity Two (Allow 30 minutes)**

Read chapter 67 by Morley in Boyd-Barrett and Newbold, 1995, Approaches to Media. Morley interprets his interviews with 18 London families about their television viewing and concludes that gender is the single most important factor that structures television viewing habits in all the interviewed families. List the differences Morley found between his female and his male interviewees and explain in your own words how these differences relate to modes of viewing that are not primarily masculine or feminine modes of viewing but modes of power.

**Comment**

- It is important to understand how time spent at home is a different kind of time for those working primarily outside the home and for those working primarily in the home. For some it is leisure time, for others it is a combination of work and leisure.
Gender should not be understood in an essentialist manner. Neither femininity nor masculinity are biologically given. Rather, both are socially constructed, which is to say they are the product of specific social relations which have been formed over long periods of time.

The extract from Television Viewing represents the postmodern orientation of the New Audience Research (it sees gender as a construction rather than as given; it pays attention to the everyday context of media use; it is interdisciplinary and combines ethnography with genre studies and social research in general).

So to conclude this brief description of the European tradition of cultural studies as one of the roots of the New Audience Studies, we might note that Morley’s ‘Nationwide’ Audience and Family Television as well as Ien Ang’s work on the prime time soap opera Dallas were very much part of the CCCS cultural studies canon but also constituted the beginning of a new research tradition. In terms of approach their work fits well in the CCCS tradition. Ethnography was an accepted method to study everyday practices and everyday meaning production. Nor was it uncommon to incorporate the media in analysis. What sets these studies apart is (1) their exclusive focus respectively on a popular medium and a popular television text, and (2) their reformulation of the critical project in cultural studies research. Although class in Morley’s and Ang’s work remains an important concept, the former Marxist and socialist-feminist vocabulary has been displaced by a more open critical vocabulary that makes room for the relative autonomy of taste, cultural capital (viewers’ frames of reference and cultural knowledge) and family dynamics.

2.2.2 American cultural studies research

The American cultural studies tradition, from a European perspective, seems relatively young and less informed by a straightforward political agenda. Marxism came late to the American university. However the claims of women and ethnic minority groups had a stronger presence since the 1960s than they enjoyed in Europe (Brantlinger, 1990, pp.128-9) and their voices can be heard in American cultural studies research. Not surprisingly then, the text that marks the beginning of the New Audience Research in the United States is a feminist text, the author of which is also a central figure in the American cultural studies tradition. I am referring to Janice Radway’s Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature ([1984] 1987).

Reading the Romance is a study of romance reading based on interviews and on text analysis. There are a great many differences between Radway’s project and Morley’s or Ang’s, even if their books are often taken to be the three founding texts of the New Audience Research. Whereas Morley and Ang worked from social research backgrounds, Radway was trained as a literary critic. When she wrote Reading the Romance, she was working in an American Studies department that had become critical of the then focus on aesthetic criteria in the evaluation of texts. As a result her analysis is informed by ethnography (which was gaining popularity rapidly at the end of the 70s), by the social science methods that were used by some of her colleagues as well as by the work of literary critics such as Stanley Fish. Fish argued that meaning production is the achievement of ‘interpretive communities’. The concept ‘interpretive community’ does not refer to individual people but to the norms that are characteristic of a given community and which influence how members of that community use texts and take meanings from them.

Radway was interested in the meanings and pleasures readers found in the popular but often denigrated genre of the romance. Rather than search for individual meanings, she used interviews and questionnaires as well as text analysis to find out within which discursive framework the romances were given meaning and were evaluated. By concentrating on the interpretive community of romance reading and the rules that govern reading the genre, the importance of her research is not necessarily restricted to one particular group. The concept of
interpretive community makes it possible to envision how interpretive frameworks are shared by groups of readers who have never nor will ever meet one another in the flesh (see Lindlof, 1988). Where mass-produced genres are concerned it can even be argued that to a certain extent the market is regulated by interpretive communities. Radway's readers, for example, held strict evaluatory criteria which guided their buying behaviour. They had elaborate procedures for assessing a romance: by its cover picture or its back cover blurb; they consulted with friends and relatives about `good' and `bad' romances; they had favourite authors; in Radway's research they also used a newsletter made by a bookseller to help them pick the `good' ones.

Dot, the bookseller who compiled the newsletter, was Radway's key informant. Through her she approached various of Dot's customers, asked them to fill out a short and factual questionnaire (which she used only minimally in her account) and interviewed a number of them (these interviews constitute one of Radway's main sources), all the while staying in the small Mid-Western town she calls Smithton in the book. From the questionnaire Radway learnt which romances were most appreciated by the Smithton women. In the interviews the women also talked with much feeling about `bad' romances, which evoked the intense emotions involved in the process of reading (1987, p.158). Radway therefore decided to focus also on `the failed romance' (chapter 5). A systematic analysis of the disliked titles made clear that the representation of masculine sexuality is the key to romance appreciation. Whenever the hero's behaviour cannot be clearly differentiated from that of a `bad guy' because he cannot control his sexuality, sexual attraction deteriorates into violence and romance comes close to rape. Such books fail. They don't offer what the ideal romance does offer: a rereading of aggressive or offensive male behaviour as the product of misunderstanding and previous hurt and ultimately the representation of a nurturing, symbiotic relationship with a wholly attentive, gentle other (1987, p.151).

Referring to the work of the anthropologist Clifford Geertz, Radway understands the romance as a utopian fantasy that reflects what women feel they lack in their everyday lives which, in the case of Radway's readers, is structured by patriarchal marriage. The act of reading itself is also explained in this vein, based on descriptions of reading in the interviews. Reading for the Smithton women is an - albeit minor - act of resistance. While reading they claim time for themselves. They are for once not available as family nurturers and caretakers. The interlocking of the practice of reading (resisting the demand to always nurture others) and the textual structure of the romance (which offers a fantasy of being nurtured) makes clear, according to Radway, how women cope with their position in patriarchal society. She sees the genre as a specific instance of patriarchal society, analysis of which may help understand this type of society as a whole.

Radway's work not only occupies a central place in the New Audience Research, it is also a key text in the North-American cultural studies tradition. It is especially in the American media and cultural studies milieu that the pleasures of popular culture have been explored in a non-pejorative manner, which is its postmodern merit. Modernist theory tended to see pleasure in popular texts as a form of false consciousness. In contrast the American cultural studies tradition takes a more postmodern view and understands pleasure as a (potential) form of resistance against dominant structures. In the same way that Radway interprets romance reading as resistance against patriarchal society, other scholars have interpreted popular genres to be forms of resistance against social inequalities based on gender, ethnic, age or class difference. The work of Lawrence Grossberg on rock (1983/4, 1986, 1992), John Fiske on television audiences (1987, 1990), Jacqueline Bobo on black women as cultural readers (1995) or Lisa Lewis on Madonna fans (1987) may count as examples.

2.2.3 Classical American and European mass communication research
Both the European and the American cultural studies traditions are interdisciplinary approaches that concentrate on specific cultural phenomena and research them in their social contexts from a critical Marxist, feminist or ethnic studies perspective. Although the media are often a subject of, or implicated in research projects, they do not always take centre-stage. It is in this respect especially that cultural studies research involving the media is radically different from classical mass communication research. The ‘effects tradition’ or the ‘uses and gratifications’ approach not only operate from restricted notions of subjectivity, they define media and media use very narrowly. Such narrow definitions have suited institutional goals as well as scientistic goals to produce ‘hard’ figures about audience behaviour that help ‘sell’ audiences to advertisers or give administrators and publishers a certain measure of control (see the conclusion to Ien Ang’s *Desperately Seeking the Audience*, 1991). Even when classical mass communication research has tried to trace the effects of media texts, for example, to interpersonal relationships (such as in the two-step flow model), neither the dynamics of these relationships, the fragmentary nature of our everyday identities nor the routine character of everyday life itself is taken into account. The reason for the narrow focus, at its simplest, is that cultural studies’ complex theoretical points of departure cannot readily be translated into quantifiable variables. However, not all mass communication research practitioners swear exclusively by quantitative research. The last tradition, then, that has contributed to the happening of the ethnographic turn is the classical tradition of mass communication research and, more specifically, the qualitative scholarship within it. It is based on empirical sociological method and its preferred research tool is the interview.

As in my description of the two other histories of the ethnographic turn, I will discuss a key text to draw out the characteristics of this particular historical background. In this case it is Tamar Liebes and Elihu Katz’s *Dallas* research. They cannot, they write in a 1986 article about this research project, accept content analysis as the basis for statements about the effects of a television text (1986, p.151). Nor do they accept the procedure used in Gerbner’s cultural indicators research as adequate (in which respondents are asked to fill out questionnaires about television content and about ‘real life’ such as the crime rate; their answers about television and ‘real life’ are then compared to find out how much their view of reality has been influenced by television). Liebes and Katz would like to see ‘the process of influence’ in action in order to be able to determine whether American television programmes such as *Dallas* have a cultural imperialist effect. Fifty small groups of befriended couples from five ethnic communities (four in Israel, one in the United States) were asked to view an episode of *Dallas* and afterward discuss a list of open questions. The sessions were tape-recorded. From the interview transcripts, statements were selected that were analysed to trace patterns of involvement in *Dallas* of the five ethnic groups. Involvement is seen as the key to media effects and thus to the possible cultural imperialism of *Dallas.*


- Liebes and Katz analyse the (possible) influence *Dallas* (as an example of American television) has on audiences.
- The research consists of interviews with 50 small groups (all consisting of at least 3 befriended couples) coming from five ethnic communities (Israeli Arabs, veteran Moroccan Jews, Russian Jews only recently arrived and Kibbutz members in Israel, and second-generation Americans in Los Angeles) who watched an episode and discussed it afterwards.
- A complex analytical structure is used to pattern the responses of the different groups. Liebes and Katz differentiate between critical and referential frames used in the interviews, between realistic or playful keyings, referents (I, we or they) and between value-free and normative value orientations. Together these rhetorical forms allow the
researchers to assess the respondents' degree of involvement, which is seen as an indicator of influence. If there is no involvement in a text, presumably the text cannot influence viewers.

Activity Three (Allow 30 minutes)

Read chapter 69 by Liebes and Katz in Boyd-Barrett and Newbold, 1995, Approaches to Media and compare their terminology to the chapter of Watching Dallas by Ien Ang that has been discussed above. What are the main points of similarity and difference?

Comment

- **Concern**

  Although all three authors are concerned about American cultural imperialism, the concern of each is of a different order. Liebes and Katz try to find as fine-tuned a method as possible to determine possible effects. Ang, on the other hand, is not very interested in methodological issues nor is she much bothered by the question of media effects. She reconstructs her letter writers' pleasures as well as their dislikes of the programme and identifies that what she labels 'the ideology of mass culture' serves as a frame for the way in which a large number of Dallas haters account for their displeasure (1985, p.95), or the way in which some Dallas lovers excuse their 'weakness'.

- **Ideology**

  Abhorrence of American cultural products and concern about their influence is a part of the ideology of mass culture, which is a vehicle for what Bourdieu called the 'bourgeois aesthetic' (Ang, 1985, p.116). Ang is thus interested in the ideological or discursive functioning of popular television as well as in how popular television becomes meaningful for viewers given such an ideological context.

- **Vulnerability**

  In as far as the rhetoric of media effects would have a place in Ang's reconstruction, it would be in the ideology of mass culture itself when it professes concern for manipulable and vulnerable audiences. To some extent this is exactly what classical or mainstream mass communication research does. Indeed, in Liebes and Katz's conclusion we find it stated that "[t]he more traditional groups ... seem to be more vulnerable", and that "the Western groups lack a normative defence" (1986:169).

- **Ethnography as method**

  We can conclude that ethnography in Liebes and Katz's research project is primarily a method. By juxtaposing the five ethnic communities in their research, Liebes and Katz's conclusions are formulated at a higher and more abstract level than in other New Audience Research ethnographies. Rather than give a voice to media consumers, they aim to conclude something about them: the degree to which they are influenced by the programme and are 'victims' of American cultural imperialism.

From the perspective of classical mass communication research, critical questions have been raised about New Audience Research. James Lull, for example, claims that New Audience Research does not typically produce 'real' ethnography at all, written as a product of lengthy periods of time spent with media users (Lull, 1988). A point that can be readily granted. Often
New Audience researchers are familiar with the genres they focus on and with the socio-cultural settings of their informants. They were attracted to New Audience Research as a means to give a voice to subordinated (sub)cultures and as a form of academic understanding, in equal measure.

James Curran disputes whether recent audience research is all that different from key studies in the effects tradition (Curran, 1990, pp.149-150). His criticism ignores the theoretical points of departure of the New Audience Research. The comparison between Ang's research and Liebes and Katz's research underlines the difference between seeing the media as powerful instrument of domination directed at individuals (as is the case in the effects tradition) or as part of the everyday surroundings of social subjects, relevant in varying degrees at different moments. A much more complex, kaleidoscopic view then unfolds itself. Curran's criticism is partly prompted by a dispute over the politics of the New Audience Research, to which we will turn in the next section.

Classical mass communication research, then, has contributed to the ethnographic turn by producing qualitative audience studies, even though some of these studies are deployed to settle questions of media effects which, from a postmodern or a cultural studies perspective, are hardly interesting or relevant. The media are so closely interwoven with our everyday lives and consciousness that it has become very problematic to apply cause-effect logic to them, and to disentangle them from all other social institutions. More problematical is that the `effects' approach has little real interest in the pleasure the media offer and takes a rather superior (scientific, detached) view of those who constitute the media audience, in a way that arguably demeans them. But not all contributions of classical mass communication are in the `effects' tradition. There is also ethnographic research that is closer to anthropology than most New Audience Research and which aims to describe rather than to theorise or criticise, such as the research collected by Thomas Lindlof in Natural Audiences (1987).

**Activity Four (Allow 30 minutes)**

Read chapter 71 by Allor in Boyd-Barrett and Newbold, 1995, *Approaches to Media*. As you read, consider the distinctive perspectives on audiences of each major approach to the study of media.

**Comment**

Allor's work shares its theoretical perspective with such New Audience Researchers as Ang and Radway. (1) Note that when Allor speaks of cultural studies, he refers specifically to the work of the CCCS. With the benefit of hindsight, we can see that in 1988 cultural studies was on the verge of developing into regionally located traditions, such as American, European and, recently, Australian cultural studies. It would take some time for them to be referred to individually. (2) Note also the considerable differences between how different critical communication research traditions understand the place of audiences, ranging from a voiceless position in political economy to the position of discussion partners in cultural studies.

**3. Politics and the New Audience Research**

The political commitment of New Audience Research ethnography relates directly to its feminist heritage. Rather than the `macro politics' of older Modernist theories such as, for example, Marxism, the New Audience Research sets store by the `micro politics' of everyday life. Thus, Morley concentrated on gendered power relations in *Family Television*, Janice Radway related her romance readers' appreciation to their position in what she terms ‘patriarchal marriage’. Ien Ang showed how cultural appreciation and depreciation are produced in everyday media use. Jacqueline Bobo worked with black women. In *Star Gazing*
(1994), Jackie Stacey explores the relation between women audiences and their beloved film stars historically. Their work is directed at demystifying the seeming naturalness of such generally accepted ideas that popular culture is ‘bad’ or that women are inattentive viewers whereas men are better able to concentrate. They show how popular culture yields many meanings, some of which confirm the dominant ideology, some of which attack and undermine it. They show how the idea that women are naturally inattentive viewers serves as a legitimation for the division of labour in many households. In everyday life, then, it becomes particularly clear how ‘macro political’ structures are reproduced and how individuals partly assent in this reproduction and partly rebel against it. The radicalism of the New Audience Research lies in its recognition of the essentially convoluted nature of politics at the level of everyday life. The people on whose behalf critical academics write are often quite attached to a life that is ultimately based on their subordination.

Some critics see the New Audience Research’s commitment to the micropolitics of everyday media use as a ‘loss of critical energy’ (Corner, 1991, p.269). This suspicion is strengthened by the preference many New Audience Researchers have had for popular fiction rather than for (popular) news genres, while ethnographic studies of media production continue to be sparse. Kirsten Drotner (1993) identifies a hierarchy here between micro analysis of processes of everyday media consumption and macro analysis of the fundamental issues of economic production and institutional politics, which appears by definition to be more political in nature. The problem with such a political hierarchy is that it is also a gendered hierarchy. The New Audience Research’s focus on the micro processes of media consumption is a result of its feminist legacy but also an achievement which is no less political than to study journalism’s role as democratic watchdog or our involvement as citizens with news media. The (political) importance of questioning how gender is constructed in practices of media consumption is underlined in the contribution by Ang and Hermes to Mass Media and Society (Ang and Hermes, 1996) and in David Morley’s Family Television (1986). (Those interested in ethnographies that deal with news or with media professionals should look for Ingunn Hagen’s work on Norwegian television news (1994), or Irene Costera Meijer’s interview-based study of soap opera production, which focuses on how issues of ethnicity are negotiated (2001). Justin Lewis’s The Ideological Octopus (1991) contains a news study and a study of the Cosby Show).

James Curran, in his article The New Revisionism in Mass Communication Research: A Reappraisal (1990), upbraids New Audience Research for betraying radical politics, and calls it ‘revisionist’. For those coming from a Marxist tradition, ‘revisionism’ is a harsh term that has overtones of ‘selling out’ on the principles of doing battle for a better world. Radway’s Reading the Romance is the only study that earns favour as an example of radical research for its strong use of the term ‘patriarchy’. In later articles Radway herself uses the term much more sparingly. Other feminists, moreover, have criticised Radway’s use of the term because it tends to conjure up visions of a giant conspiracy against women. Such visions make it virtually impossible to understand women’s investments in the patriarchal order as anything other than self-delusion or false consciousness, which neither explains those investments nor provides a sound basis for mutual respect between ‘feminists’ and ‘other women’. Postmodern feminism has argued that pleasure needs to be taken seriously, that ‘correctness’ can never be a measure of (all) our (fragmented) identities, and that pleasure and politics can coexist in one’s life. The critical perspective of neither John Corner nor James Curran allows for such a point of view and therefore the (postmodern) feminist politics of the New Audience Research, directed as they are to micro-political issues, do not deserve a place on their political agenda. Before I go on to discuss the place of politics in recent ethnographic audience research, it is useful to take a closer look at the Curran article.

Activity Five (Allow 30 minutes)
Read chapter 65 by Curran in Boyd-Barrett and Newbold, 1995, Approaches to Media. In what ways does he argue that 'it was all said before' in earlier empirical work?

**Comment**

Although Curran is possibly right that the effects tradition found out half a century ago that media audiences are active and creative, surely those are not the terms in which it framed its conclusions, nor was that the dominant message of academic research. Even today guilt and the notion that 'it is not good for you' dominate people's feelings about popular television (side by side with the claim that we should all be allowed to do things that are bad for us), which to some extent results from academic debate and research. (See for example Gray, 1992). Here too lies a political issue that has been recognised by the New Audience Research but not by earlier traditions.

Apart from their interest in the micro politics of everyday media use and the feminist issues related to these practices, the New Audience Research also sets political store by ethnographic method. What, concretely, are the advantages of an interpretive ethnographic perspective?

The importance of an ethnographic understanding of audiences, according to Ang in *Desperately Seeking the Audience* (1991), is that it is a form of interpretive knowing that counters the institutional perspective. It does not reduce the particularity of the multitude of everyday situations of which media consumption is a part to saleable knowledge or to the kind of empty generalisations that come to be known as 'objective facts'.

Ethnography offers the possibility of putting issues of media consumption on the academic and public agenda without relinquishing their particularity and makes it possible to engage with how meaning is produced in everyday life situations (see Moores, 1993, pp.4-5; Gray, 2002). Ethnographies retain the particularity of the original practices and thus, arguably, offer better guarantees for respect towards those concerned. Ideally, they reflect on the research as social practice itself and offer readers the possibility to come to their own, possibly different conclusions. Media ethnographies do not offer objective 'facts' but interpretations. They thus challenge the character of academic knowledge and make it impossible for researchers to hide behind impersonal language or the power of the institution. As a reader of a media ethnography you are entitled to an explanation of the choices the researcher made and to the words and deeds of informants upon which the researcher's interpretation is based in order to be able to check whether that interpretation is convincing. As regards the (potential) political properties of ethnographic media research, I offer the following list:

- New Audience Research is aware of the fact that ethnography, like all types of research, is pervaded with power and that it thus ought to be self-reflexive and dialogical.
- The ethnographer tries not to speak on behalf of others but invites them to speak for themselves.
- Ethnography makes contact with everyday struggle and resistance (as well as with everyday assent with the dominant order). Politics and pleasure are thus not separate but connected and interwoven.
- Ethnography is usually not motivated by concern but by solidarity with the researched. Whereas concern puts the researcher in the position of a parent, someone who knows more and sees more, solidarity is based on the assumption that the ethnographer is equal to the researched in the sense that both can learn from each other (although it is always the ethnographer who is responsible for the ethnography as text, it is her or his writing, organisation of the text and selection of quotations).
Ethnography in the New Audience Research does not quantify audiences’ multiple relations to texts nor the myriad of meanings media texts are given, although occasionally quantitative data are used to strengthen the case the researcher makes, by means of a technique called 'triangulation'. (Evidence from different perspectives and gathered by means of different techniques is used to ensure higher 'representativeness' or 'transferability', which is the extent to which the theory developed in relation to one or a small number of case studies is relevant to other social and cultural phenomena as well). The goal of ethnography is to retain the particularity of media practices which makes it fundamentally an anti-institutional knowledge. Ethnography does not aim to produce marketable or saleable knowledge. It aims to give radical cultural criticism.

4. Loose Ends

In this unit I have tried to give a genealogy of the ethnographic turn in mass communication research. Three possible histories suggested themselves: the European cultural studies traditions as point of origin, or the American cultural studies tradition, and even the classical tradition of mass communication research itself. Depending on your perspective and position you will favour a different tradition as the absolute beginning. Although histories are a comforting kind of knowledge because they are something to hold on to when you try to get a grasp on a new field of knowledge, they are also slightly dangerous. Especially the kind of short and smoothed down version I have presented here. Reality is never as straightforward as this type of tale. You should also bear in mind that it is very difficult to allot ethnographies that are published today to any one of these traditions exclusively. My own work on women's magazine reading, for example, is influenced as much by European as by American cultural studies research, and it could even be argued that it is a good example of classical qualitative mass communication research (Hermes, 1995). It is based on a higher number of interviews than most ethnographies and in that regard would probably meet with the approval of qualitative mass communication researchers such as James Lull. But my research is also based on Radway's rendering of the interpretive community concept albeit in a slightly adjusted form: I speak of the interpretive repertoires that readers use to make women's magazines meaningful. And last but not least, in its focus on readers and passing over of the text, it was inspired by the CCCS tradition of youth culture research as well as by more recent British studies that concentrate on a medium rather than on specific texts, such as David Morley's television research (1986) or Ann Gray's research on the VCR (1992).

The experience of interviewing readers of such a mundane and inconspicuous medium as women's magazines has made me aware of some of the problems and shortcomings of ethnographic media research as it stands today. One is the question of the relative meaninglessness of everyday media use, which in its turn begs the second question of how to research the everyday and everyday media use. Given that ethnographic media research aims to reconstruct the meanings and pleasures of media texts or genres from the perspective of its users, it is rather shocking to find out that much media use may also be relatively meaningless. In the case of my women's magazine readers (women and men) I found that they did not have all that much to say about women's magazines. Of course they were able to describe how they use women's magazines and to outline which kinds of articles and pages they like but they offered hardly any evaluative comments or lay theories which made clear what made women's magazines meaningful and attractive to them. Yet when they talked about their own life histories or about other (popular) genres they were very talkative, well-informed and did offer views and explanations. Mundane everyday media use, I concluded, is interwoven in our everyday routines which only come to have explicit meaning when we look back or when we need new ways of coping. As long as the routines work well, there is no reason to reflect on them or on everyday life in general. Reading women's magazines, watching television or listening to the radio often have such a routine character. Especially in ethnographic research,
in which the context in which specific media, genres or texts are used is important, it pays to take into account that informants are not always busy making meanings but that they often feel comfortable with the (shared) meanings that have become incorporated in these routines.

These shared meanings and routines are researchable but it takes more effort to uncover them because they are what is most taken for granted. In cases such as this, it pays to have a large number of interviews as well as observation notes from which different pieces of the jigsaw puzzle can be sifted. Forms of discourse analysis are more suitable than other research methods because they are based on the assumption that cultures exist as a result of shared meanings. That means that individuals are not the source of those meanings but that they will refer to what they assume is common knowledge. From the bits and pieces, slowly a picture will emerge. This picture will need to be interpreted before it can actually explain, for example, the use of women's magazines. Adequate ethnographic research is thus comprised of two parts: a descriptive part (with extensive quotations from informants) and an interpretive part in which the researcher uses the quotations and the description to come to a (narrower) explanation. This means that ethnographic research always needs to focus gradually. A description of the flow of everyday life is endless, theoretically speaking. Therefore, at a certain point we need to concentrate our attention on a limited number of themes. A successful media ethnography is based on the realisation that it is impossible to understand a culture as a whole (notwithstanding the fact that this is what interpretive ethnography promises to do).

A final 'loose end' concerns the question of whether audience ethnographies should or should not include text analysis? The risk of a combined audience and text analysis is that it is very difficult not to suggest that the everyday reading of your informants stands inferior to your own, academic, superior interpretation. A new and exciting direction is taken by audience- led studies of media content that aim to uncover audience members' agendas around such issues as masculinity or multiculturalism that are otherwise mostly hidden from public view (Hermes, 2005). Central to internet ethnography, is the notion that audiences can be viewers and authors, or producers and consumers, at the same time (Baym, 1999; Hine, 2000). The more important point to make, however, is that text analysis is not a necessary part of understanding the meanings a particular genre or even a particular technology has. Ann Gray's research on the videocassette recorder as both a medium and as a technology illustrates this well (1992), as does David Morley's Family Television research (1986). The challenge for future research surely is to proceed further down both roads. Ethnography remains one of our best tools to grasp the concerns, criticism and hope of media users, while it also allows us to research how different media technologies and contents merge in our daily lives and shape the practices that offer all of us the means to construct and experience our identities. In that sense, one of the classic essays of the ethnographic turn in media studies, Media, Technology and Daily Life by Hermann Bausinger, still has much to offer.

Activity Six (Allow 30 minutes)

Read chapter 70 by Bausinger in Boyd-Barrett and Newbold, 1995, Approaches to Media. Consider how you could apply this analysis to your own use of media technologies.

5. Checklist

- 'The ethnographic turn' is more than a label of a particular method used for audience or reception research. 'Ethnographic' generally refers to four related characteristics:
  - Media use is seen as part of everyday life rather than as a separate bounded area that can be studied in isolation, as is the practice in traditional mass communication research. Thus James Lull researched the dynamics of family life as much as the television use that is part of everyday life.
Media practices as such are not so much of interest as are the meanings given to these practices. 'Ethnography' involves reconstruction of the perspectives, pleasures and meaning-producing activities from the point of view of viewers, readers or listeners rather than from the point of view of the academic, the producer or the market researcher. Ien Ang's analysis starts with the letters from other viewers and her own viewing experience, whereas Tania Modleski's analysis starts and ends with the text although it claims to have authoritative knowledge of the experience of viewers.

`Ethnographic' thus also stands for a political investment, for a recognition that practices of media use have mostly been researched for specific institutional goals. Audience ratings are an example, used to determine advertising tariffs rather than to gain any genuine understanding of those the media purportedly serve.

A last characteristic of the term `ethnographic' is the aim to develop theoretical understandings of the practices that were observed or participated in or that were reconstructed through lengthy, open interviewing.

- The roots of the ethnographic turn (or the New Audience Research) can be found in three traditions: European cultural studies, American cultural studies and qualitative mass communication research.

- Criticism of the New Audience Research has focused on its inadequate methodology (too few interviews, too little information about the choices the researcher made and about how she or he arrived at a particular interpretation) and also on its `revisionist' politics (exaggeration of the everyday resistance of media users; insufficient attention to institutional politics and power relations).

References


