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**The 'Implied Audience' in Media and Cultural Theory**

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# The 'Implied Audience' in Media and Cultural Theory

## The View From the Crossroads

Audience research is at a crossroads. Looking backwards, the legacy of diverse research traditions (critical communications, feminist theory, literary reception-aesthetics, interpretative microsociology and others) which converged on audience research can still be clearly discerned. If one looks forwards from these 'new audience studies' (Curran, 1990), there seems some danger of losing one's way, although again diverse possibilities exist. Thus, this paper asks 'what next' for the agenda of audience research. I will argue that the future agenda should seek to strengthen external relations between audience research and other domains of media and cultural studies, for in these other domains the case for explicitly considering audience research has been noted but not thus far accepted. Yet what I describe as 'the implied audience' plays a significant, albeit little acknowledged, part in much of media and social/cultural theory. While there has been a mutual reluctance for audience researchers and those in policy, production or textual studies to engage in dialogue, one may also account for the poor acceptance of audience research, at least in part, by pointing to the troubled state of audience research itself. As I argued at the conference, *Crossroads in Cultural Studies* (Tampere, July 1996; see also Livingstone, in press), audience research is losing its direction because, through an internal narrative of progress, a canonical version of audience studies is being constructed. In this canonical narrative, one of the diverse traditions of audience research, that of British cultural studies, is emerging as predominant, and overviews of the field seem to slip between talking of audience studies and cultural studies as if the former were now subsumed by the latter.[1] The

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[1] See, for example, Boyd-Barrett and Newbold (1995), Curran et al (1996), Lewis (1991), Moores (1993), Morley (1992), Silverstone (1994). The diversity was charted by Jensen and Rosengren (1990), who identified five traditions of audience research (namely, effects research, uses and gratifications research, literary criticism, cultural studies, and reception analysis), and by Lindlof (1991), who also identifies five styles, this time of qualitative audience research (namely, social-phenomenological, communication-rules, cultural studies, reception studies and feminist research). In both cases, though, it is unclear which constitute the new audience research, and this seems increasingly to refer just to the cultural studies approach). A similar lack of clarity (itself a casualty of

problem is that this leads to a closing down of the theoretical diversity that was so exciting and productive ten or fifteen years ago.  It also seems that cultural studies may be unwilling to take audience research forwards by addressing the burgeoning number of criticisms being made of the new audience studies.

Indeed, rather than developing a set of responses to the criticisms which would, in turn, have developed audience theory and research, in the face of criticism and self-doubt the new audience studies appear to be giving up on the key concept of the text, together with related concepts like the preferred reading (e.g. Lewis, 1991).  Similarly, they appear to accept that much of their focus has been overly media-centric (e.g. Schröder, 1994), that the methodology of audience ethnography is not what had been hoped (e.g. Bird, 1992), that resistance and subversion among audiences is not as challenging as had been supposed (Schiller, 1989), and even that the concept of audience itself is no longer coherent or useful (Allor, 1988; Ang, 1990; Fiske, 1992).  These critiques are such that one begins to wonder why cultural studies entered into audience research.  Murdock (1989) identifies the two key arguments of cultural studies thus: first, the recognition that culture is ordinary, legitimating the analysis of everyday culture (what Radway, 1988, calls 'the kaleidoscope of daily life', p.366); and second, the recognition that dominant culture represents processes of power or ideology which seek to privilege certain ways of seeing over others.  Cultural/audience studies translated this into research questions which ask first, how do ordinary viewers respond to such ordinary media texts as soap operas or pop music, and second, how might these ordinary and localised responses to media show evidence of subversion or resistance to the dominant and privileged processes of meaning construction? That the empirical research which resulted has run into some problems does not necessarily invalidate the reasons for undertaking the research.  But it has clearly been problematic that the first question, stimulated by the limitations of semiotic or screen theory approaches to media texts, asked a very open question (namely, how do actual audiences interpret texts differently from academics, or, what are the differences between elite and popular readings?).  For of course, many differences were found -- in retrospect, it could hardly have

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the convergence of traditions) is visible **when Boyd-Barrett (1995) suggests that, 'if obliged to define a single distinguishing feature of media study over the past 15 years many scholars would focus on new approaches to audience or 'reception' analysis' (p.498), thus (mis)aligning several traditions.**

been otherwise -- which lacked a coherent framework with which they could be interpreted. As a result, empirical research bearing on the first question (namely, of ordinary viewing activities) has been taken, somehow, as providing an answer to the second question (namely, of resistant viewer activities). Hence the critical question, when is activity resistance (and, how much resistance makes a difference; Dahlgren, 1997; Morley, 1993; Seaman, 1992)? I shall return to this problem later.

Both the retreat in the face of criticism, and the resulting uncertainty over 'where next' for audience research, may also be understood as reflecting, for some commentators at least, a questioning of whether one should have been at the crossroads in the first place (Ang, 1996; Grossberg, 1993). This is because the crossroads has been widely interpreted not simply as the simultaneous focusing of research traditions on the question of audiences but also as a site of interdisciplinary convergence in which the major splits within media and cultural studies might be resolved (these include administrative vs. critical traditions, qualitative vs. quantitative methods, and reflect longstanding divisions between the social sciences and humanities; Livingstone, 1993). Indeed, maybe it is doubts over that wider endeavour, rather than doubts about audience research in particular, which account for the critical attention currently focused on audience research.[2]

As an audience researcher working at the interface with cultural studies, I suggest that whatever the next steps for convergence and interdisciplinarity, the value of having reached the crossroads is clear. The body of work generated by this theoretical and methodological confluence of diverse pathways has been stimulating and informative. Researchers have moved on, irreversibly, from the problematic old arguments -- the semiotics of fixed and given textual meanings, the assertion of linear, causal effects on a passive audience, and the homogenous, mass 'audience'. It has been established that audiences are plural in their decodings, that their cultural context matters and that they do not always agree with textual analysis. In short, the audience has become *visible*, theoretically, empirically and politically, having been previously marginalised and devalued within media theory (Livingstone, 1993), and many would now agree with Silverstone (1990) that the audience is 'a potentially crucial pivot for the understanding of a whole range of social and cultural processes that bear on the central questions of public

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[2]Thus some of the reasons why cultural studies is now critical of audience research concern a mix of epistemological, political and methodological problems apparently unanticipated by those unaccustomed to the messiness of empirical social science research (Bird, 1992; Brunt, 1992; Silverstone, 1994).

communication...[which are] essentially questions of culture' (p.173).[3]

But this new visibility of the audience and audience research will be temporary unless two pressing problems are addressed. First, *how* can audience research be conducted in a way which answers its critics (Livingstone, in press)? Second, *why* do audience research -- what could a theory of audiences, and a body of empirical audience research, assuming it can answer its critics, hope to contribute to media and cultural studies more generally, and how might it be integrated with, rather than at best merely placed alongside policy, production and political economy studies of media and culture (Dahlgren, 1997; Mosco, 1996; Seaman, 1992)?

I suggest that a research agenda is needed which connects audience research with production/texts/context research as firmly as actual audiences are, inevitably, connected with actual production/texts/contexts. Thus my focus in this paper is on what I shall term 'the implied audience' in media and cultural theory, for it seems imperative that audience researchers engage with this implied audience. At present, the 'implied audience' in economic, societal, historical or cultural theory may bear little relation to actual audiences, and these other theories may use audience research inappropriately or even find audience research incomprehensible. In some cases, the 'implied audience' threatens to be something of a parody of current audience research. In short, a new received wisdom is emerging outside audience research itself in which either audiences are either seen as highly active, individual and resistant or, by contrast, audience researchers are seen to be making such extreme claims about the activity, resistance and diversity of audiences that they may be safely ignored. As Schiller observes, with some justice, 'where this resistance and subversion of the audience lead and what effects they have on the existing structure of power remain a mystery' (Schiller, 1989, p.149). Clearly, the moment for a more qualified and careful analysis will, if not seized, be lost as audience research is once more stereotyped as reductionist and unimportant.

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[3] While these debates have centred on the television audience, perhaps because television's history coincides with that of the establishment and funding of social science and critical/humanities research, similar debates are developing in relation to other media.

Before proceeding, I would like to offer some defence of the concept of audience.[4] Allor describes the audience as 'an abstracted totality' (1988, p.219), while Fiske (1992) suggests that cultural studies should replace the noun with the verb, 'audiencing', to describe the process of generating and circulating meanings. Mosco (1996) follows Ang (1990) in claiming that the audience 'is not an analytical category, like class, gender or race, but a product of the media industry itself .... [and that research has] not established the conceptual value of the term, particularly its relationship to social class, race, ethnicity, and gender, which are more than demographic groupings -- they are lived experiences' (p.262). This seems curious, for all analytical categories are the product of their culture (isn't class a product of industry? isn't being a horror fan or a soap viewer a lived experience?). Can we not theorise audiences just because the term is also used by the media industry? The concept of ethnicity is as much a part of imperialist, even racist discourses as it is a concept used by cultural studies. Gender and class are embedded in social policy discourses; indeed the division of people by gender has, arguably, more often supported patriarchy than liberated women. The key point about audiences, as has been traced by those interested in the history of audiences (e.g. McQuail, 1994; Neuman, 1991; Thompson, 1995) is that being positioned by particular forms of mass communication, with particular possibilities for interactivity and engagement, with particular kinds of meanings prioritised and legitimated over others, is central to the lived experience of the twentieth century. It throws into question assumptions about other forms of communication (primarily face-to-face) and, indeed, about space-time relations more generally (Thompson, 1995). While the link from gender, class or ethnicity to social structures and hence to power is more directly and clearly established, this need not lead one to conclude that being positioned as an audience is unrelated to power. Increasingly, people's status as members of media audiences is becoming a crucial way in which they participate as citizens. Just as important is the way in which, also increasingly, people's positioning as members of a particular class, gender or generation is itself mediated through their audiencehood.[5]

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[4]Use of the term 'audience' confounds taxonomic and collective conceptions: is the audience defined taxonomically as a group of individuals who, though they may never meet, share the common feature of watching television; or is the audience defined as a collectivity, a group of individuals who engage directly with each other about the media they view (Lunt and Livingstone, 1996). Radway's (1984) audience, based on an actual community, resembles the latter, as does Hobson's (1982). But many other studies adopt the former definition, assuming that for analytic purposes viewers may be grouped as 'male viewers' or 'soap fans' or 'the child audience'.

[5]Concern over media-centrism leads Schröder (1994) to agree that 'individuals have no identity as simple receivers of such products' (p.340) for 'individuals/subjects precede the media products they consume: they and their

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cultural repertoires have been formed by multiple discourse (interpretive communities?) throughout their lives' (p.340). While people obviously exist prior to any particular engagement with media, this position seems crucially to underplay the extent to which the media are implicated in the formation of contemporary discourses, both directly in people's media-immersed lives and indirectly in the sense that cultural discourses are fundamentally formed within a mediated environment.

It must be of concern that the audience, and audience research, has been neglected by the bordering domains of media and cultural theory, other social sciences and elite commentators (such as politicians, policy makers and broadcasters).[6] And it seems ironic that, just as the visibility and importance of audience studies is becoming established, audience researchers themselves seem to be moving away in the face of internal and external criticism. For as so often before, this will allow those outside audience research to assume, once again, implicitly or otherwise, adequately or otherwise, a knowledge of the activities and nature of audiences. Yet surely, just as the critique of ideal/model/implied readers challenged textual analysis and opened the way for audience reception and ethnographic study, so too empirical work on audiences can inform and challenge those other domains of social, political or cultural theory that implicitly presume but rarely investigate the nature of actual audiences. In relation to communications research specifically, Lindlof (1991) suggests that the poor regard with which audience research has traditionally been held, is partly because it sits on the opposite side of a profound qualitative/qualitative divide from the rest of communications research.[7] More broadly, however, the implied audience is generally rendered invisible within, say, discussions of which new media technologies will 'take off' or which public policies will 'be acceptable' or which political arguments will 'work'. If audience research is to have broader impact, it becomes imperative to recognise where other domains of theory and research depend, implicitly or explicitly, on

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[6]**In relation to elite commentators, some complex changes are discernable. While** d'Haenens (1996) notes the continued distance between producers and audiences, and the resistance among producers to knowing anything about their audience, let alone tailoring their programmes accordingly, **Curran (1996) identifies a shift in broadcasting policy and regulation from the Reithian confidence of 'broadcasters know best' to the new consumer rhetoric of 'let the audience be the judge'. Yet, Schlesinger and Tumber (1994) trace how pressure groups and politicians increasingly target their messages to other elites, bypassing the public.**

[7]Lindlof rightly notes that this divide depends on an oversimplified mapping of theory onto method and that greater tolerance of methodological diversity across the whole field would be productive (see also Lewis, 1997). Lang and Lang (1983) make a parallel argument regarding greater tolerance across the oversimplified administrative/critical communications divide.

arguments about audiences and thus to frame audience research so that it addresses them productively. This will demand an engagement with theories not necessarily in tune with cultural studies, but without it, an alternative audience theory will be (re)invented.

What then can be said of the relations between audience research and bordering domains of theory and policy? I shall consider briefly here four cases in which the implied audience is at odds with the audience studied by audience research: the choice of cases is arbitrary in the sense that many cases could have been selected, but I am concerned to indicate the range of domains within which assumptions about audiences are made. Thus in each case I aim to show how implied audiences -- the ways in which audiences are theorised outside audience theory -- form part of the often invisible assumptions on which much theorising about the media, society and social change is built.

A relatively optimistic case, based on the use of audience research within political/social theory, indicates the potential for audience researchers to engage, more explicitly and more directly engage, with theory on its borders. Alexander and Jacobs (in press) argue for 'the need for re-centering civil society theory around a more empirically viable model of media communication' (p.2). They want to shift social and political theory away from the dominant approaches which restrict their conception of civil society to one of a sphere of power and decision-making, focusing attention on the regulatory procedures which guarantee access to, and the conditions which organise, rational public debate. Rather, Alexander and Jacobs argue that civil society works not only through its relations with, or autonomy from, the state and economy, but also 'as a communicative space for the imaginative construction and reconstruction of more diffuse, but equally important, collective identities and solidarities' (p.1). In so doing, they observe that 'the dominant paradigm' of civil society theory depends on an often implicit theory of the media as primarily a means of conveying information to a unified, receptive public. The influence of empirical audience studies is clear in their reformulation of civil society theory, from micro-level diffusion and reception studies to more macro-level studies on political campaigns or global media events (Dayan and Katz, 1992). Thus they suggest instead that the media offer polysemic texts to heterogenous, agentic and far from disinterested publics for whom influences, identities and solidarity are as determining of their relation to the media, and hence to the public sphere, as is the quality of the information or the conditions for receiving it. Without meaning to celebrate the infinite activity of the audience, for they also assert structural limits on audience agency and heterogeneity, their aim is to amplify the analysis of civil society by adding

to a consideration of public information and the regulation of public space those considerations which mediate social relations between publics and communicators -- identity, influence, solidarity.

The opportunity here for audience studies, then, is two fold. First, to develop a more specific, more qualified account of the ways in which audiences are motivated, diverse, interpretative. Second, to connect the often autonomous analysis of audiences in terms of their identities and community to the theories of the public sphere and civil society. This offers an answer to the 'so what' question asked particularly of studies relating media and the everyday construction of identity/social relations, by bringing such micro-level studies under the umbrella of citizenship. Several openings for this are established already: in the analysis of both the politics of gender and of sexuality, the links between the personal and the political make it obvious that identity and solidarity mediate access and participation within the public sphere. Such arguments then connect with theoretical challenges to the normative ideals of the Habermasian public sphere, advocating instead plural, interested, diverse publics in communication with each other, resulting in a public sphere in which the concept of rationality is itself up for negotiation rather than a consensual given ( Livingstone and Lunt, 1994). They also, however, have some very practical implications for how public participation in the media could or should be managed.

This links with the more problematic case of the implied audience, namely the ways in which audiences are presumed about in policy debates. Barnett (1996) discusses the now-familiar dilemmas facing public service broadcasters as they rethink their relation to their audience in a climate of diversification and commercial pressures. Policy over programming content and scheduling depends in part on how the audience is conceptualised (e.g. Scannell, 1988). Is the audience a unified group or a collection of diverse, sometimes marginal subgroups? Is the viewer a consumer or citizen? Should public service broadcasters give viewers what they need, what they deserve, what they want or what they'll pay for? And how directly should the audience, or the state, be involved in such decisions? The relation between broadcasters and their audience is both conceptual, as reflected in the above questions, and empirical. The empirical relation typically depends on the ratings system: but as channels multiply and audience share inevitably drops, this system will no longer legitimate public service or minority broadcasting, notwithstanding the epistemological and political problems with such a system (Ang, 1990). The informal and, in Britain at least, generally secret way in which audiences

relate to broadcasters is through ad hoc, programme based, qualitative research and other audience feedback arrangements (letters, phone-ins, etc) are largely unaccountable and offer little of public or lasting value. In this case, then, it is particularly problematic that, again particularly in Britain, academic research has by and large refused, for scientific, political, or theoretical reasons, to engage with broadcasters (of course, this refusal is, often, mutual). As communication theory more generally has been provoked to rethink its relation to policy studies (Noam, 1994), and as public service broadcasting is increasingly threatened (e.g. Collins, 1993), audience researchers could rethink their role in the debate over audience provision. It cannot be empowering for viewers for academics to sit by, having researched audiences' everyday lives and concerns, while broadcasters decide, according to their limited and motivated criteria, what future viewers will see. The irony, again, is that academic audience research, being in the public domain, will in any case be drawn upon, and at present is taken to legitimate anything broadcasters do on the grounds that it is now known that audiences will make what they want of media contents and they may bear the responsibility.[8] How do critical audience researchers draw the fine line between consumer empowerment and passing the buck? As in the case of the development of new forms of information and communication technology, 'it might well be worth considering how a wider range of social actors, with a wider range of objectives, might constructively join in this process, whose results are so intimately entangled with our everyday lives' (Miles et al, 1992, p.80).[9]

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[8]The use of audience research for moral panics over new technologies, child audiences or violence in society all represent familiar examples of how research will be used, whether or not supported by the academic community (e.g. Rowland, 1983).

[9]Following Noam (1994), communications researchers might engage with policy by, for example, proposing access and participation rules for emerging virtual communities, advocating the case for narrowcast minority channels or informing policies which draw girls into computing.

These issues seem particularly pressing in the face of social, technological and cultural change. My third case, then, focuses on analyses of the diffusion and social impact of new media technologies within economic or sociological theory, for as Miles et al note, 'images of consumers and of consumption are integral to the debates about the nature of the product' (1992, p.80). For example, Cohen (1995) supports his argument that economic predictions tend towards hype, by claiming, after considering both market research and the diffusion trajectory of supposedly related media, that audiences are conservative and mean.[10] Similarly, Neuman (1991) argues that it is the psychology of the mass audience -- 'the semiattentive, entertainment-oriented mind-set of day-to-day media behaviour' (p.13), the preference for 'common-denominator' content -- which acts as a brake on the individualising potential of the new media technologies. In contrast, Wallbott (1996) shows how audience research can, admittedly more in retrospect than in prospect, help understand why certain technologies turn out to be market failures, despite initial confidence that communication would be radically transformed.[11] From a more cultural perspective, Haddon (1992; see also Murdock et al, 1992) reviews research on the home computer which suggests that, at least at the early stages of its introduction, actual users (not simply implied ones) influenced its subsequent development. For example, following users' preference for games, the originally multipurpose microcomputer was refashioned into the games machine: 'to use the language of cultural studies, users, albeit with the collaboration of some parts of the computer industry, 'appropriated' the micro, helping to transform the meaning of the artefact' (p.85). Such case studies reveal how going beyond the implied audience is particularly problematic for innovators of new media where traditional market research methods are not feasible (Miles et al, 1992), and so like broadcasters, innovators use their families for rapid and informal market testing. As with economic research (Cohen, 1995), innovators use market

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[10]Cohen (1995) draws on two sources of audience data, concluding first that audiences are conservative by drawing a parallel between the potential video on demand market and the actual, and disappointing, video rental market, and second, that market research conducted among actual users of video on demand show people to be 'mean' and so unlikely to pay for it. However, research is needed on audiences in terms of their daily practices, everyday contexts and meaning, not just in terms of disposable income and acquisition preferences, before it can be decided whether the parallel with video rental is appropriate (are these similar contexts of use, can we compare owning facilities in the home with being a member of a local video club?) and so whether, in this case, people may be conservative in the face of new opportunities.

[11]For example, if one examines the relations between media and users, research on how computer-mediated group discussions (as in teleconferencing) work differently from face-to-face discussions, or on the unfamiliar problems to which such new forms of communication give rise (from encouraging risky decision making, to personal embarrassment or loss of certain forms of social feedback), a more informed analysis becomes possible of the likely take-up, use and consequences of such new media (Wallbott, 1996).

research on related products (where the appropriateness of industry-based categorisations of goods as related or different is open to question), diffusion curves of consumer products (problematic insofar as these assume constant meanings or identities to the products at each stage in the curve), information about sociocultural trends (here sociological theory as well as lay responses play a role), and even their families as a source (however inappropriate) of audience response.

Yet while (mis)informing economic predictions about demand for new technologies, Neuman's semiattentive, entertainment-oriented audience and Cohen's conservative audience, in particular, fit poorly with the conception of the audience in media and cultural theory, where the emphasis is on heterogeneous, motivated, resistant, participatory audiences. Thus my last case for exploring the implied audience provides an opposite example, in which the conception of audience implicit in other macro level theories does fit, this time only too well, with that of audience research. Abercrombie, Hill and Turner (1980) made a double attack on the dominant ideology thesis: first that elites do not have consensus of ideas; and second that active audience and media effects research show that elite ideas cannot simply be imposed on the masses (as supported by research such as that of Liebes & Katz, 1990). In both instances, then, beliefs are more diversified than societal/macro theories sometimes allow for. Similarly in relation to theories of cultural imperialism, Hallin (1996) notes that 'the most important methodological trend in recent research on broadcasting in the Third World is clearly the turn towards reception analysis (for it has) discredited simplistic notions of a one-way flow of cultural influence from center to periphery' (p.12). As Hallin goes on to argue, the link to political economy is crucial if, for example, we are to understand the differing significance of active audiences in democratic and totalitarian regimes. As suggested above, when faced with social change, the implied audience in diverse macro-level theories becomes especially questionable. For Cohen, new media technologies must find a market, with significant economic implications if they succeed or fail. For Neuman, the diversification of forms of communication technology threatens our concept of the mass audience (including that of the national audience). The theme of globalisation is also central to the concerns of Abercrombie et al, as well as those concerned with media in developing countries, and again the question comes to the fore of how the audience should be conceptualised -- as fragmented or unified, as national, local or global in its cultural references, identities, and sense of community. And as noted in my first case, similar arguments may be made about the increasing role of the media in democratic political processes, a macro-

level shift which depends for its analysis in part on the construction of audiences as citizens.

**Activity, resistance and the problem of quantification**

Paying attention to the implied audience in theory and policy not only requires audience researchers to pay attention to domains not necessarily of their own choosing, but also to research questions not necessarily on their own agenda. Yet many possibilities exist for the construction of explicit relations between audience research and the four domains, among others, identified above, as I have tried to indicate. One advantage, then, of a focus on the implied audience is that it invites a wider range of research questions onto the agenda. For it has become problematic that, in stressing the importance of the politics of representation and of making visible marginalised voices, cultural studies has somehow come to make this one question the main basis for audience research. Rather asking about resistance is one of a variety of interesting questions. Thus in principle, many would agree that 'because the reception of communication is a crucial site for the struggle over the definition, and re-definition, of social reality, audience analysis raises critical political questions' (Jensen, 1987, p.22). But in practice, the claim that (particular, actual or implied) audiences are conservative or subversive must be qualified by a careful consideration of the contingent limits to audience activity and resistance. The identification of resistant or marginalised voices needs contextualising in relation to the identification of normative or mainstream voices. Moreover, observations of commonality and consensus require explanation as much as do those of diversity, and the absence of unexpected audience readings should be as interesting a finding as the surprises which have motivated audience researchers hitherto.

Indeed, when it comes to the hazardous business of making generalisations, which others will make if critical audience researchers themselves hesitate, one may still suggest that, despite interesting and important instances to the contrary, television programmes are often heavily overcoded, closed and repetitive and watching television is more often likely to involve a battle between the hegemonic positioning of the text and the nonresponsiveness of the viewer (Kubey & Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Or, indeed, it may more often involve a rather neat fit between the hegemonic positioning of the text and the equally hegemonic perspectives of the viewer than anything more creative or politically significant (Mosco, 1996). The counterexamples are of considerable theoretical interest, because they are central to our understanding of what the media mean to (all) people and why they engage with media in the diverse ways that they do (for

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example, the audiences who reject *Dallas* on cultural grounds, the gay audiences who read against the grain, those who don't understand foreign news, or the women who feel supported, even if not radically challenged, by the strong female characters in soap opera). But this claim should not be confused with the claim that such cases are quantitatively representative of audiences. In other words, possibility is distinct from probability. While for cultural studies the interesting exceptions and borderline cases are rightly taken as revealing of the culture which generates them, as Gerbner et al (1986) pointed out, what is powerful about television is the way in which television tells most of the stories to most of the people most of the time. So, are most of the people understanding most of the stories in more or less the same way most of the time?

Mosco (1996) criticises cultural studies' resistance to seeking such generalisations, frustrated that cultural studies appears to construct generalisations as the artificial imposition of clumsy categorisations on diverse, contingent and elusive practices. Yet audience research undermines its claims by such a refusal to address such questions of quantification as what are the limits on diversity in interpretation, how tightly can interpretations be tied to context, are most interpretations subversive, and to what extent do such interpretations translate into actual political resistance? This leads Lewis (1997) to argue for quantification in cultural studies, pointing out that questions of quantification do get answered, but implicitly and hence, probably, inaccurately: for, noting the presence or absence of cultural practices is inherently quantification, as is the presumption that certain practices are commonplace or marginal, increasing or decreasing in frequency.[12] Thus the research literature abounds with claims that 'the girls did...' or 'most viewers prefer...' or 'many of my interviewees felt...' .[13] Such implicit quantification allows some commentators now to feel justified in supposing that audiences are rarely resistant with as much confidence, and as little warrant, as some audience researchers have presumed the opposite hitherto. Why do such claims, not atypical of qualitative research, go uncontested on methodological grounds (Hoijer, 1990)? What kind of accountability is offered to other researchers unable to check out the raw interview materials? What will happen when another researcher makes contrary empirical claims? Why do qualitative researchers even wish to make such claims, when supposedly the focus is on the identification of certain practices, within certain contexts, rather than on trends, differences or generalities?

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[12]How this might be done requires careful consideration, for if one advocates quantification, one must surely also advocate statistics, or how else are conclusions to be fairly drawn from numbers?

[13]Examples include the accounts in Buckingham (1987), Haddon (1992) and Morley (1986), among others.

**Macro and Micro-Level Audience Theory**

The problem of quantification of claims of active and/or resistant audiences, though couched in methodological terms, raises the more fundamental metatheoretical problem of the relation between macro and micro level theory.  For while the details of everyday life, when explored at the micro level of lived experience, may turn out to be individually diverse and, arguably, interesting in their own right, if there is some systematic patterning by which they may be interrelated one may suppose a link back to the macro.  Quantification through the identification of differences, trends or generalities is simply one, undoubtedly problematic, means of identifying such patterning.  The desire to see activity as resistance, possibility as probability, reflects the desire to claim macro level significance for micro level work.[14] Problematically, this translates the problem of integrating audience research with the rest of media and cultural theory into the problem of getting macro-level analysis to notice micro-level concerns, and does so by overclaiming the macro-level significance of micro-level processes of audience reception and consumption.  In this last section, I will argue for the importance of rethinking the relation between the macro and the micro in audience research.  Not only might this open up some constructive ways of answering the critics of audience research, but it is necessary to the enterprise I have proposed of linking the actual and the implied audience in social and cultural theory, given that much of the latter is framed at the macro level.

An alternative strategy, as I have elaborated elsewhere (Livingstone, in press), is to argue for a reconceptualisation of the audience at a concept which works at both macro and micro levels of analysis. The point is to avoid a simple mapping of micro and macro onto audience and media/culture/society (thereby reasserting traditional problems in mass communication theory). I am particularly concerned to avoid the reductionist tendency to limit the concept of audience to the (social)psychological or micro-level of analysis. Despite its problems, the term 'audience' is inherently relational, a worthy abstraction up from the 'text-reader' metaphor or 'the implied reader', which demands that people and media are mutually conceived rather than being separately theorised only then to face the artificial problem of additionally theorising their

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[14]This is by no means to suggest that micro analysis does not have significance for macro theory.  As Mosco (1996) argues, cultural studies has effectively used micro-level analysis to reveal processes unanticipated by macro-level analysis, particularly revealing often implicit, indirect or hidden cultural formations beyond those of class or economic difference, and thereby offering a strong case for other domains of media (and sociocultural) theory to attend to micro-level research.

mutual relations. 'Audience' is neutral of the economistic assumptions of 'market', the political assumptions of 'public' or 'mass' or 'nation' and the idealism of 'community'. It is also inherently discursive, and at present is central to sufficiently diverse discursive contexts, from regulatory policy to critical research that it cannot easily be highjacked by any one (nor could there be no non-discursive concept to replace it with). A relational approach to audiences would satisfy Allor's (1988) otherwise paradoxical analysis that 'the concept of audience is more importantly the underpinning prop for the analysis of the social impact of mass communication in general' (p.217) and yet that the artificial construction of 'a unified concept of audience' (Allor, 1988, p.218) should be avoided. It would more explicitly connect audience research to the analysis of institutional and political power, media economics, and broad cultural processes, and would reorient audience research away from the near-exclusive investigation of the extent to which audiences' social constructions and interpretative activities affect or resist macro level processes or structures so that, as suggested earlier, such an investigation need not bear the major responsibility for justifying audience research.

Munch and Smelser (1987) specify the micro/macro distinction as follows: 'we see the micro level as involving encounters and patterned interaction among individuals (which would include communication, exchange, cooperation, and conflict) and the macro level as referring to those structures in society (groups, organizations, institutions, and cultural productions) that are sustained (however imperfectly) by mechanisms of social control and that constitute both opportunities and constraints on individual behaviour and interactions' (p.357). Meso-level analysis may also be appropriate for certain media and cultural theories (focusing on the units between individual and institution -- household, family, community, and a range of other informal groupings). Consider, as an example, Thompson's (1990) claim that 'modern culture is, to an ever greater extent, an *electronically mediated culture* in which oral and written modes of transmission have been supplemented, and to some extent displaced, by modes of transmission based on electronic media' (p.226). This claim invites empirical investigation at several levels of abstraction, all of which concern audiences. One can may ask about the economic and institutional implications of changing markets for different media technologies (e.g. the fate of the publishing industry), about the sociocultural inequalities which may result from differential access to media for different sociodemographic groups (e.g. female preference for books becomes an increasing disadvantage in a computer culture), and about the educational consequences for individual children of varied patterns of print vs electronic media use (the

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books versus television debate).

It is important not only to consider the advantages of multilevel analyses but also to consider how analytic coherence may be sustained *across* these different levels.  A problematic example, noted earlier, is the apparent inconsistency between the arguments for active and creative audiences supported by individual and household/community levels of analysis and the arguments for the audience as a rather passive and readily managed market at the macro/economic level.  In integrating these levels, it may emerge that the active appropriation of meanings by individuals or households (i.e. drawing a new consumption object into existing, divergent, meaningful practices) *operates*, at the economic level, as a kind of conservatism.  In other words, unless the micro is discriminated from the macro, the following paradox arises: resistance at the micro level may mean no change (i.e. resistance to new meanings) while conformity may mean change (i.e. adaptation of everyday practices to prevailing or incoming norms); but, at macro level, resistance implies change while no change implies conservativism.[15]  If analytic coherence across level is not sought, one is left with a kind of either/or analysis, in which the audience is conceptualised either at the macro level, as a market or public, or at a micro level, in terms of family interactions, peer relations, even parasocial interaction with the screen.  Not only may this result in contradictions across levels, as I have indicated, but such an approach also undervalues the contribution that each level of analysis can offer.  Thus, research on audiences at a macro level intersects with other macro-level theories whose justification is rarely questioned (most notably, the economic and the political).  Research on audiences at a micro level respects the individual agent and is informative about interaction patterns in everyday life.  But how patterned interaction relates to social groups, how cultural productions relate to individual encounters, how exchange affects the operation of organizations, remains unrecognised.

I have argued that audience research could usefully conceive of audiences in terms of the relationship between media and people (rather than audience as a kind of social grouping), and that this relationship could usefully be analysed at both macro and micro levels.  How, then,

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[15]'Resistance' must be differentiated not only at micro and macro levels, but according to context.  For example, to adopt a diffusion perspective, the early market for personal computers was conservative, meaning that few bought; from an individual's point of view, it is hard to detect whether someone has not bought because they are individually conservative -- fearful of the uncertainties which computers may bring, or resistant -- making a consumer protest against the information age. Later in the diffusion process, the former may be overcome as prevailing norms change, while the latter may not.

should the relation between micro-level activities of the audience (reception, interpretation, engagement, conversation) and the macro-level significance of the audience (as a market, a public, a nation, a movement for social change or conservativism) be conceptualised? Of course, the problem of the macro-micro link in social and cultural theory is neither new nor readily soluble. Nonetheless, an explicitly multilevel approach is required if audiences are to retain their place in media and cultural theory. Silverstone (1990) argues that audiences are 'a social and cultural object within the complex reality of everyday life...[which are] embedded both in the macro-environment of political economy and in the micro-world of domestic and daily existence' (p.174). Similarly, Mosco (1996) argues that 'cultural studies reminds political economy that the substance of its work, the analysis of communication, is rooted in the needs, goals, conflicts, failures and accomplishments of ordinary people aiming to make sense of their lives, even as they confront an institutional and symbolic world that is not entirely of their own making' (p.251). The question is, how does 'embedding' work, or, what force does this 'reminder' have?

Munch and Smelser (1987, p.358) suggest the relation between levels is often confused in principle as well as in practice: 'microtheories invariably involve definite assumptions about the macrocontext in which interactional processes are embedded (and therefore have a macrocomponent) and ... macrotheories invariably involve assumptions about individual motivation and interaction (and therefore have a microcomponent)'. Thus, the question of the relation between implied and actual audiences incorporates the problem of implied macro or micro-level concepts (and unless explicitly conceptualised as a multilevel concept, the 'audience' is particularly slippery in this respect).[16] To paraphrase Munch and Smelser, audience theories invariably involve definite assumptions about the sociopolitical context in which audience processes are embedded (and therefore have a sociopolitical component) and theories of society and politics invariably involve assumptions about audiences (and therefore have an audience component). However, this former set of assumptions are being currently explored by cultural studies to the extent that the audience (and text) are disappearing (castigated as media-centrism), while the latter assumptions are so little recognised that the audience has barely made an appearance.

Alexander and Giesen (1987, p.14) usefully outline the five major approaches to the link

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[16]Indeed, as Pan and McLeod (1991) point out, many terms in communication theory are ambiguous, perhaps deliberately so, in refusing to clarify, or limit, the scope of their claims; this ambiguity may even account for the success of certain terms, as well as for their problems.

between micro and macro as follows:

> '(1) rational, purposeful individuals create society through contingent acts of freedom; (2) interpretive individuals create society through contingent acts of freedom; (3) socialized individuals re-create society as a collective force through contingent acts of freedom; (4) socialized individuals reproduce society by translating existing social environment into the microrealm; and (5) rational, purposeful individuals acquiesce to society because they are forced to by external, social control'.

I shall draw on their analysis to consider the usually implicit assumptions which relate the macro and micro in media and cultural theory (see also Munch and Smelser, 1987). This list of approaches is not intended as a dimension, from agency/action to structure/order, but may be elaborated approximately as follows (see Table 1). Option 1 represents instrumental individualism, with a focus on empirical analysis of costs, investments, opportunities; here the macro is an aggregate of the micro. Option 2 represents interpretive individualism (symbolic interactionism /social constructionism), in which the micro is equated with the individual, conceptualised in terms of interpretative subjectivity and itself the source of order. Option 3 offers a less agentic version of social constructionism, in which the micro level is autonomous but less creative than option 2, for the limits are set by the macro-level. Option 4 places more emphasis on the importance of socialization (the internalised macro), taking a collective position on order but an instrumental-subjective position on action. Option 5 represents objective structuralism, taking a collective (even, repressive) position on order and an instrumental-objective position on action. As regards empirical research, the extreme options (1 and 5) each represent cases where, because agents are so idealised or because agents are so powerless, empirical investigation of agents becomes unnecessary. For option 4, empirical analysis of the micro is interesting simply as a useful indication of collective processes. As we move towards the middle options, empirical analysis becomes more important for identifying under which conditions the balance between structure and agency, order and action, operates in practice.

Where then do audience theories fit in? Not only do audience theories embody various notions of micro and/or macro, but they also depend on different assumptions about the micro-macro link; and I attempt to draw out these assumptions in what follows with some hesitation. Option 1, it seems, is adopted by those who conceptualise *the audience as a market* (or aggregate of individuals), including political economy and behaviourist approaches. The approaches cited earlier of Cohen (1995) and Neuman (1991) would fit here. Option 2 includes a diversity of

approaches to *active and creative audiences*, based on interpretative sociology, ethnomethodology, phenomenology and pragmatism, all approaches which ask 'how' questions about the pragmatics of seemingly self-evident, mundane acts of mediated communication' (Lindlof, 1991, p.26). Option 5, *the audience as duped mass*, subject to media hegemony, represents the starting point from which critical theory, cultural studies and feminist approaches are trying to find the escape routes. Thus option 4, *the audience as (just occasionally) resistant*, seeks to identify the exceptions to option 5 -- in terms of acknowledging the possibility of a break between the cultural and the economic, the micro and the macro (see also the examples of Abercrombie, et al, 1980, and Hallin, 1996, discussed earlier). Option 4 thus seems to fit with Lindlof's (1991) description of cultural studies as emphasising how audiences 'devise inventive ways of resisting, subverting, or otherwise re-making messages or technologies' (p.28).

-------------Table 1 about here---------------

Possibly more for historical than theoretical reasons, these moments of resistance, significant for establishing a degree of autonomy for the micro, have been explored by drawing on option 2, the interpretative/constructionist analysis of the micro level (Carragee, 1990). Hence Grossberg's (1993) statement that cultural studies is committed to 'the fact that reality is continually being made through human action' (p.89-90). Morley (1993) also seems to endorse this incorporation of Alexander and Giesen's second option into the fourth when he expresses criticism of work which 'fails to see that macro structures can be reproduced only through microprocesses' (p.17), claiming further that in the realm of media consumption, 'local meanings are so often made within and against the symbolic resources provided by global media networks' (p.17) (although much hangs on the balance between 'within' and 'against'). Problematically, however, these symbolic interactionist/social constructionist positions offer little analysis of power, whether institutional or agentic, and so this exploration of the relative autonomy of lived culture relates poorly to a linked micro-macro analysis. The distinction between options 4 and 2 also gets blurred when, for example, Thompson (1994, p.44) shifts from the claim that 'the appropriation of this material by recipients is a process that always takes place in particular social-historical circumstances' to the claim that appropriation 'is an active, creative and selective process in which individuals draw on the resources available to them in order to receive and make sense of the symbolic material transmitted by the media'. For while the first point is hard

to argue with, the second begs a number of questions about how far the context actually supports the individual's creativity, rather than backing up the institutional power of the encoder. Murdock (1989, p.439) suggests that it is 'a critical political economy of communications' which will explain the limits on audience activity and diverse interpretations, for 'explaining the dynamics that promote or inhibit the diversity of media production is ... crucial to a full understanding of how ideology works in and through the communications system'.  In other words, the way in which cultural studies privileges the discursive and the cultural over the material and economic, creates a missing link in cultural studies theory (which I am here characterising as the difficult relation between options 2 and 4) which for Murdock may be resolved by a political economy analysis.[17]

While the link between options 2 and 4 is proving problematic, the interesting possibilities raised by the synthetic middle option seem relatively underexplored.  As Alexander and Giesen note, this may even be the most desirable option, yet it is the least theorised, lacking the stimulating and persuasive force of more one-sided theories.  By naming option 3 *the audience as public*, I mean to capture the force of the micro-macro relation as conceived within democratic theory, for despite significant limitations, both structural and contingent, the political system is built on the informed consent of the thinking citizen, who is in turn socialized within a liberal/democratic framework.  A number of recent writings may be seen as attempts to fill out the third option — as when Corner (1991) proposes the 'citizen-viewer', when Fiske (1992) draws on de Certeau to allow the viewer tactics but not strategies in re-creating social meanings, when Katz (1992) reformulates his own longstanding position by drawing on Tarde to argue for links between public opinion, everyday conversation and the media, and when we argued (Livingstone and Lunt, 1994) for an analysis of the role of the audience in terms of a post-Habermasian conception of the public sphere, opening up heavily circumscribed but occasionally

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[17]There would seem to be an assumption in these debates that this missing link between macro and micro analyses should be addressed by linking the political economy *of the media* with the analysis of *audiences*. While this is undoubtedly worth doing, the indirect links between political economy of society more broadly and audiences-as-people (workers, family members, consumers, voters) are surely more important. For not only the political economy of the media but also many other kinds of macro-contextual limits on audience activity (relating to education or the labour market, for example) are important .

unpredictable and undoubtedly public spaces for the negotiation of diverse discourses. A less politically oriented approach to option 3 also exists, incorporating some aspects of Corner's (1991) 'popular culture' project where this intersects with reception studies. Here the question may be more broadly, 'how meanings of content can be variable, yet socially intelligible' (Lindlof, 1991, p.29), and Lindlof's communication rules approach may also fit option 3: 'a concern with the systems of interpersonal norms, statuses, and conduct which regulate communication within bounded settings' (p.27).

There are several things one can do at a crossroads. One is to look back. As critical audience researchers tell a narrative of progress about the journey thus far, a reminder of the diversity of paths which converged on the crossroads is a useful exercise in itself. Another possibility is to look forward, even if it seems that the problems anticipated and experienced of the paths ahead seem insurmountable. But it is also possible to sit and rest awhile, for after a little reflection and sustenance, the problems may prove manageable after all. If audience researchers want anyone else to notice their journey, and especially if they don't want others to make up an alternative account of their journey, then a pause for reflection may be the best option for the moment.

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**Table 1**: Five approaches to the link between micro and macro
*(adapted from Alexander and Giesen, 1987)*

| Main focus of approach | Associated assumptions | Conception of the audience |
|---|---|---|
| 1. instrumental individualism: macro as aggregate of (idealised) micro | emphasis on analysis of investments, costs, and opportunities | audience as market (audience as consumer) |
| 2. interpretative individualism: micro as individual interpretative subjectivity | social constructionist positin with the micro as source of social order | active/creative audience |
| 3. less agentic version of social constructionism | micro as autonomous but less creative than in interpretative individualism | audience as public (the citizen-viewer) |
| 4. emphasis on socialization as the internalised macro | takes a collective position on order but an instrumental-subjective position on action | audience as potentially resistant |
| 5. objective structuralism | takes a collective position on order and an instrumental-objective position on action | audience as duped mass |