

## **Critical Perspectives: Key Media Concept: Audience**

The concept includes a consideration of how audiences read texts and how they interact with them. Media audiences can be defined in terms of *location*, *consumption*, *size* and *subjectivity*.

- *Location* – the domestic consumption of media output raises questions about regulation and control.
- *Consumption* – Audiences are defined by what they consume i.e. are they an audience of a particular genre, medium or text. Fans can be defined as passionate/ well informed about a programme
- *Size* – there is a need to distinguish between mass audiences that are broadcast to and niche audiences who are involved in narrowcasting.
- *Subjectivity* – The impact that membership of pre-existing groups will have on audience members. These groups include: gender, nation, religion, education, to name but a few.

One of the key areas of concern when discussing the concept of audience is the 'Passive vs. Active Audience' debate. The following models will help to explain each side of the debate.

### ***The Passive Audience and the Effects Tradition:***

One way of looking at audiences is the power that the media text has over its audience. This point of view is represented by the whole tradition of the effects studies. There are many studies including conspiracy theory, the copycat effect and desensitisation. One model of key significance is:

#### ***Hypodermic Needle Model (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1970s)***

- This model sees the media 'injecting' values, ideas and information directly into each individual as part of a passive, powerless audience, thereby producing a direct and unmediated effect.
- This model is commonly encountered in debates concerning the mass media and violence. It rarely discusses the positive outcomes of a direct effect caused by the media, such as the response to world disasters once the media begins to portray devastation to its audience.

### ***Active Audiences and Reception Theories:***

There are many different theorists who argue that audiences are comprised of active individuals who are directly involved in the selection and consumption of media output, one of particular interest is:

*Uses and Gratifications Model (Denis McQuail, 1987)*

- This model proposes that audience member consumption of media is motivated and directed towards the gratification of certain individually experienced needs.
- The emphasis of this model is on an active audience, actively seeking combinations of gratifications from the range of media output selected and used.
- McQuail offers the following typical reasons for media use: *information; personal identity; integration & social interaction* and *entertainment*
- *Information* – this may include self-education; seeking advice on practical matters; information on issues or events that affect the individual; satisfying curiosity or general interest.
- *Personal identity* – finding reinforcement for personal values; models of behaviour; gaining insight into oneself; the contents may be used to explore; challenge, adjust or confirm the individual's sense of identity and self.
- *Integration & social interaction* - gaining insight into the circumstances of others (social empathy); identifying with others & gaining a sense of belonging; finding a basis for conversation; substitute for real-life companionship.
- *Entertainment* – escaping or being diverted from problems; relaxing; emotional release; filling time; aesthetic enjoyment.
- The gratification received from a media output will vary depending on the individual audience members needs.

The introduction of the uses and gratifications model encourages researchers to get away from the habit of thinking in terms of 'what media do to people' and substitute it for the idea of 'what people do to the media' (Halloran 1970).