

1.2 The Unshuffled Essay #1

Essay Question:

‘Outline how and why audiences have been researched in terms of “effects” and “uses”.’

3. When investigating the complex links between the media and the audience, it can be said that their relationship is ‘mutually constitutive’ (Evans, 2005, p. 2). As a result of this relationship, audiences can be researched using many different methods and in many different contexts. This essay will look at how and why the audience is researched in terms of ‘effects’ and ‘uses’, in particular. When looking at the audience in terms of ‘effects’, the research usually looks at the causal effect that the media have on its audience in terms of behaviour and attitude. When looking at the audience in terms of ‘uses’, a different perspective is used: the research concentrates on how the audience uses the media and also how the audience can affect its production. When looking at the media and their uses and effects on the audience, this essay will also look at how the research is done. This is also very important as it allows the results and the relationship to be properly understood.

7. Firstly, when investigating the audience in terms of ‘effects’, the research is usually very controlled. It may take place in a laboratory and its aims are to look at the effect a particular type of media exposure has on a target audience. The target audience may be any section of society, although it is usually a particular group that may be deemed especially vulnerable to the influence of the media. Children are a good example of a group seen as easily influenced. Albert Bandura performed extensive research in the area of media ‘effects’ on this particular type of audience (Bandura et al., 1961, in Livingstone, 2005). His ‘Bobo Doll’ experiment used groups of children in a controlled environment to investigate how representations of

violence on TV affect their behaviour. Bandura used a control group that were shown a non-violent video or none at all; the variable groups were shown programmes containing violence either by real people or in cartoons. The children were then left in the playroom with a number of toys and observed to see if the groups exposed to media violence acted differently to the control group. Bandura's findings showed that the children who were shown media violence subsequently displayed a greater degree of aggression and violence to the Bobo doll than those in the control group. A similar type of research was undertaken to ascertain whether the same findings would occur in a more natural environment. These took place in a nursery group where one group of children was exposed to video representations of violence and aggression and a control group was treated normally with no exposure to aggression or violence. The findings were less than convincing as the children were not subsequently violent in the more natural situation: the results did not therefore support Bandura's original views.

5. Following on from Bandura's research, it has been suggested that similar types of research conducted in a more natural environment have yielded less convincing results to support the hypothesis. Sonia Livingstone says, 'Some conclude that the laboratory experiment demonstrates the existence of causal effects, while the weak or absent effects shown in field experiments reflects their poor design and conduct' (2005, p. 26). On the other hand, Bandura's 'Bobo Doll' experiments are seen by some to be too stringent and the control-led environment used can cause different behaviour than in a more natural environment.

Livingstone also says, 'Others conclude that the laboratory experiment is too artificial to be generalized to everyday life while the lack of effects under naturalistic conditions justifies a "no effects" conclusion' (Livingstone, 2005, p. 26). Bandura's research into the effects of media violence on children is used by some as an argument for media censorship. Although

some of the results produced by the research are inconclusive, it is clear to see that there is the potential for the media to affect the audience in both behaviour and attitude.

4. When looking at research into 'uses' of the audience, it is important to understand that its aim is different to the 'effects' research as it doesn't look at how the media affect the audience, but, rather, at how the audience uses the media that are produced and also how they affect their production. The methods used in this type of research are often very different to the ones used in the 'effects' research. It is usually the qualitative research methods such as interviews and observations in a real environment that are implemented instead of the lab-based, formal methods in the 'effects' research. Ethnographical research investigates the audience in terms of 'uses' as one of its aims is to look at different cultures and ethnicities, and to look at the media in the context of the different kinds of people who consume it. A strong example of the audience using the media is in Daniel Miller's study, 'The consumption of soap opera: *The Young and the Restless*' (Miller, 1995, in Gillespie, 2005). The study looks at the Trinidadian viewers' thoughts about the US soap opera *The Young and the Restless*. Miller's initial view was that the Trinidadians would resent the soap opera as it depicts very affluent Americans with little in common with the Trinidadian viewers; the actual results were, however, surprisingly different. His findings show that the viewers did associate with the aspects of the programme relevant to them. A clear example is of one person commenting on their views of marriage in their society, 'I believe marriage should be 50–50 not 30–70, the woman have to be strong; she have to believe in her vows no matter what ... That make me remember *The Young and the Restless*: Nicky want her marriage to work out but Victor is in love with somebody else, but she still holding on' (Miller, 1995, in Gillespie, 2005, p. 157). This qualitative research resulted in clear evidence that the audience used the media in their own way: as an active audience, they filtered the relevant aspects

using their own prior knowledge and beliefs, gaining a different reading of the material than may have been expected by the producer or, indeed, by the researcher.

2. Following on from the idea that the audience makes conscious and active decisions, Elihu Katz (1974) suggests that the audience is motivated and active: research shows that, as a result, people are selective in the media they consume. Some take this perception even further, by saying that people are selective about their reading of the media as they take into account prior knowledge, context and their beliefs as well as the media content. Katz's view clearly indicates that he believes that the audience has the ability to choose how to use the media produced and also uses its own degree of perception towards the desired message (Livingstone, 2005, p. 21).

1. After looking at how the audience uses the media, it is also suggested that the media uses the audience to affect what is produced. The 'media and development' model of international communication shows a key example of the 'uses' of the audience. As Marie Gillespie (2005) says, the BBC's national radio broadcast of *The Archers* was heavily influenced by the society it was being broadcast to, and the trials and tribulations of the society at the time. *The Archers* was first broadcast in the UK in the 1950s, and was a way of delivering information to farmers through the medium of a fictional radio programme. In the 1990s, *The Archers* started to be broadcast in Afghanistan at this time and in this society the programme was used to cover issues such as forced marriages, opium addiction and land mines. 'There they worked with local producers to produce a serial relevant to Afghanistan at the time. The soap was successful beyond all expectations' (Gillespie, 2005, p. 146). These two international examples of both how the audience use the media, and also how the media use the audience are very clear in illustrating how and why research is done into audience 'uses'. This research

gives an insight into understanding the 'mutually constitutive' relationship between the two (Evans, 2005, p. 2).

6. In conclusion, it is easy to see that there is a relationship between the media and the audience. There are, however, varying research methods used in terms of 'effects' and 'uses'. The methods used in the research of media effects on the audience have often been stringent and formal; the research by Bandura in a laboratory environment is a clear example. This stringency and formality can have a bearing on the results, as shown by research in a more natural environment. On the other hand, the research methods used when investigating how the audiences use the media and how the media use the audience are more qualitative. Researchers' interviews and observations made in a 'real' and natural environment may be more revealing of audiences' experiences but are also harder to quantify. The research into the audience in terms of 'effects' and 'uses' can give an insight into how the audience is 'affected' in a different way, such as the effect on behaviour or attitude by what children consume from the media; also, how the audience uses the media in everyday life, in their routines and conversations such as in Trinidad; and, finally, how the audience can affect what the media produces, for instance contemporary topics in *The Archers* in Afghanistan. This is how and why the audience is researched in terms of 'effects' and 'uses'.