

Audience Research

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Audience research is a broad term that, in principle, denotes the systematic study of any → audience for any purpose. In practice, the term usually connotes efforts to describe and analyze patterns of media consumption, often for some commercial or administrative purpose. Such research became commonplace in the early twentieth century as new forms of mass media were introduced (e.g., film and radio) and those media became increasingly intertwined with the business of advertising and marketing. Contemporary audience research uses a wide range of theories and methods, which can be organized using the familiar labels of theoretical vs applied, quantitative vs qualitative, and, somewhat less conventionally, syndicated vs custom research.

THEORETICAL VS APPLIED AUDIENCE RESEARCH

Theoretical audience research operates on two conceptual levels; *micro and macro*. The former tends to look at audiences from the “inside out,” adopting the perspective of an individual audience member. Of theoretical interest are questions about what motivates media selections, what stimuli command attention, how media are used in everyday life, what meanings and/or pleasures are derived from use, and how people engage media as consumers and fans. The relevant bodies of theory run the gamut from the social scientific (e.g., Blumler & Katz 1974; Zillmann & Vorderer 2000), to the humanistic (e.g., Morley 1992; Hills 2002). The latter, *macro-level research* tends to look at audiences from the “outside,” in an attempt to understand their characteristics and behaviors in the aggregate. This perspective sees audiences as markets and/or publics and is often rooted in economics and marketing (e.g., Webster & Phalen 1997; Napoli 2003). Working at this level of analysis has allowed researchers to develop models or “laws” of audience behavior (e.g., Rust 1986; Goodhardt et al. 1987; De Vany 2004).

Applied audience research provides information that can be acted upon by institutions and media industries. It is more prevalent than theoretical research, due primarily to the commercial character of most media systems. Since the early days of radio, advertisers have demanded surveys documenting the size and composition of the otherwise invisible audience. This gave rise to audience “ratings” research, which has become essential to the operation of advertiser-supported media throughout much of the world (→ Nielsen Ratings). Such data provide the basis for buying and selling audiences, and can be useful in supporting macro-level theoretical research. Commercial motives also drive a variety of research efforts measuring more “qualitative” aspects of the audience. These include surveys and various ethnographic methods designed to assess audience preferences, attitudes, lifestyles, and product usage. Foundations and nonprofit organizations may also do applied research to determine how media are used and whether they are meeting various social or instructional objectives. The producers of the children’s television series *Sesame Street*, for example, have a long history of conducting evaluative research.

QUANTITATIVE VS QUALITATIVE AUDIENCE RESEARCH

Quantitative research methods are common in audience research (→ Quantitative Methodology). The most prevalent is → survey research, which is based on some form of probability sampling. Audience ratings companies use surveys to estimate audience size and demographic composition for an ever growing number of media (e.g., radio, television, movies, video games, out-of-home, Internet, etc.). Other regularly scheduled surveys are used to provide syndicated reports that relate people's product purchases and personal characteristics to their media use, or assess their familiarity with and liking for various programs and celebrities (i.e., Q scores). One-of-a-kind surveys are often used to gauge media preferences, levels of engagement, opinions, and other administratively or theoretically useful information (→ Public Opinion Polling). Very large, nonrandom, samples or panels are also sometimes used to gather data. In fact, newer media technologies that produce a record of their use (e.g., server logs or digital cable boxes) offer the prospect of survey-like behavioral data based on a census rather than a sample (→ Rating Methods).

Quantitative audience research is not, however, confined to surveys. Media industries routinely measure the appeal of their offerings. Television and movie industries have long used a kind of theater-testing in which prospective viewers are recruited to watch a forthcoming film or pilot program. Respondents view the show in an auditorium and are asked to score various aspects of what they see – often in a near continuous manner that allows researchers to assess the ebb and flow of audience reactions. Such testing can help executives decide whether to go forward with a project, and if so, how to modify or promote it. Similar techniques have been used to measure people's reactions to political communication and candidate debates. True experiments are relatively uncommon in applied audience research, but have been, and continue to be, a staple of more academically oriented theoretical research (e.g., Zillmann & Vorderer 2000); (→ Experiment, Field). Laboratory research sometimes features the use of physiological measures including eye movement, heart rate, and galvanic skin response (→ Experiment, Laboratory).

Although quantitative methods predominate, *qualitative methods* are increasingly popular in both applied and theoretical audience research (→ Qualitative Methodology). Sometimes labeled audience ethnographies, these techniques include focus groups, unstructured interviews, and participant observation (→ Ethnomethodology). Focus groups, in which a moderator guides a small number of recruits in a discussion, have long been a staple of marketers and programmers. The method has been used to develop products and ad campaigns, craft radio station formats, assess media personalities, and, in the case of more theoretical research, help determine how people “decode” or assign meaning to media texts (e.g., Morley 1992). Similarly, in-depth → interviews and → observation have been used by both theorists and practitioners to understand the social uses of television, how people adapt to the introduction of digital video recorders (DVRs), and concurrent media use throughout the day.

SYNDICATED VS CUSTOM AUDIENCE RESEARCH

Syndicated audience research is a standardized research product that is sold to multiple subscribers. It plays an important role in media industries because its costs can be

distributed across many buyers, and it provides a credible, “third party” accounting of audiences independent of the media or advertisers. The most visible form of syndicated research is audience ratings. Measurement companies in the US and much of the world record audience behaviors using a variety of techniques, some of which are quite expensive (→ People-Meter). These data are processed and packaged as different reports that constitute a “currency” used to buy and sell audiences (Napoli 2003; Webster et al. 2006).

Like many forms of information, producing such research has high “first copy” costs, and very low marginal costs. Moreover, the product is a → “public good.” Once created, its supply is not diminished by consumption. These characteristics give the syndicators flexibility in pricing to attract additional business. They also make it difficult for new competitors to enter the market, since challengers will incur first-copy costs with uncertain prospects for displacing the competition and recovering those costs. Further, incumbent syndicators typically offer products that are the result of an ongoing negotiation between clients with disparate interests (e.g., advertisers and media). Their estimates reflect a compromise upon which all agree to conduct business, and their numbers become embedded in the routines of the affected industries. Even modest changes can upset the ecology of the system. Hence, in established industries it is not uncommon to see one syndicator emerge as the principle, quasi-official scorekeeper for the medium in question.

Custom research is tailor-made to suit the needs of a particular client. Media organizations often conduct research for their own internal consumption. Radio stations offering popular music formats will, for example, conduct “call-out” telephone surveys to assess the popularity of current hit songs. Alternatively, outside research firms and consultants are sometimes hired to gather data and make recommendations. Since these studies are designed to client specifications they can be quite useful internally, although for external consumption they lack the apparent objectivity of syndicated research.

CRITICISMS OF AUDIENCE RESEARCH

Because of its central, and highly visible, role in the operation of media industries, syndicated research, and in particular audience ratings, has been the object of criticism. Generally, critics have one of three concerns: the accuracy of existing services, the need for different regimes of measurement, and more radical challenges to the entire enterprise of measurement.

In the US alone, billions of dollars in advertising are allocated in accordance with audience ratings. Programming is, in turn, cancelled, renewed, and/or cloned on the basis of those estimates. Increases in the sheer abundance and portability of electronic media, along with advertisers’ desires to reach ever more narrowly defined target markets, has caused many in the industry to ask whether the current system is *sufficiently accurate*. While bigger, more representative samples and better behavioral measures always remain a possibility, they must be weighed against their costs. Quality is one of the factors upon which industry participants inevitably compromise.

A related concern addresses the appropriate *object of measurement*. The new media environment seems to invest audience members with ever greater control over what they see and when they see it. Advertisers worry that a simple count of “eyeballs” is no longer enough to guide their expenditures. As a result, there is growing interest in measuring the

extent to which people are “engaged” with the media they consume. Such efforts are not new. “Qualitative ratings” have been used in western Europe and were briefly available in the US during the 1980s. The problem is reaching consensus on a useful definition of such factors, agreeing how to measure them, and finding clients willing to pay the price.

A much larger and more radical charge is that all commercially motivated audience research is part of an undesirable enterprise bent on *colonizing and commodifying audiences* (→ Audience Commodity). It is true that media industries often reduce people to one-dimensional members of a target market, or assign them value on a “cost per thousand” basis. Whether the public is, on balance, harmed by this is debatable (e.g., Ettema & Whitney 1994; Webster & Phalen 1997). While audience research inevitably fails to capture all the complexities of media consumption, the machinery of measurement has the virtue of making the audience manifest to institutions that desperately seek its attention.

SEE ALSO: ▶ Advertising ▶ Audience ▶ Audience Commodity ▶ Ethnomethodology
▶ Experiment, Field ▶ Experiment, Laboratory ▶ Interview ▶ Media Marketing
▶ Nielsen Ratings ▶ Observation ▶ People-Meter ▶ Public Goods ▶ Public Opinion
▶ Public Opinion Polling ▶ Qualitative Methodology ▶ Quantitative Methodology
▶ Rating Methods ▶ Survey

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