



Investigating Audiences

Andy Ruddock



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First published 2007

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33 Pekin Street #02-01
Far East Square
Singapore 048763

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-4129-2269-2
ISBN 978-1-4129-2270-8 (pbk)

Library of Congress Control Number: 2006937886

Typeset by Cepha Imaging Pvt. Ltd., Bangalore, India
Printed in Great Britain by Cromwell Press
Printed on paper from sustainable resources

For Christine Ruddock

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Acknowledgements

Thanks go to Martin Barker, Sarah Edwards, Kristyn Gorton, Julia Hall, Jenny Kitzinger, Alan McKee, Dianne Railton & Helen Wood for their help in guiding the direction of this book. I'm also grateful to Alan, Thomas Austin, Matt Hills and Cornel Sandvoss for giving me access to much of their important work before it was generally available in public.

Christine Ruddock, Jo, Colin, Alec & Jason Stratton, Jessica Asato & Gareth Butler, Tim Dunn, Michael Higgins, Keith Marley, Krista Puranen and Ben Watkins provided less formal help, which was of course far more important. *Nice one.*

Introduction

In the winter of 2005/6, the UK news was awash with stories detailing the social havoc wreaked by media; teenager Luke Mitchell was jailed for the inhuman slaughter of 14-year-old Jodi Jones, a murder that the police felt may have been inspired by a Marilyn Manson video. Fighting erupted between Everton and Manchester United supporters, following a late afternoon football match that had left plenty of space for all day drinking. The reason for the 5.30 p.m. kick off? Television scheduling. Across the Atlantic, saturation coverage of the Michael Jackson child molestation case led many to question if justice was possible in a trial enveloped in celebrity frenzy. Anecdotally, the signs of media influence are ubiquitous to the point of redundancy: Querying *if* media have impact is a bit like asking if cars are faster than they used to be. Of course the answer is yes. The question is not ‘do’, but ‘how’, ‘where’ and ‘for whom’?

However, these puzzles are just as difficult to answer empirically, and demand the monumental leap from what we think we know about effects to what we can research and demonstrate as scholars. Media power is hard to find mostly since it is hard to define. Do we find it in thoughts or behaviours? Does it happen instantly, or over a long period of time? Is it possible to distinguish media from other sorts of social influence? If not, how are we to account for their cultural importance? Crucially, what sort of evidence do we need, and what sort of information are we in a position to gather? In practice, these questions are so convoluted that once we explore them academically rather than instinctively, each becomes a sub-discipline.

As some readers might know, I have raised these subjects before in 2001’s *Understanding Audiences*. Only the names have changed in some of the introductory anecdotes; Michael Jackson has replaced OJ Simpson, but the principle remains. This book is *not* a revised edition; but neither can it be an entirely different project. A critical revision of the earlier volume’s thesis helps to locate the rationale for the present work. Additionally, this introduction will map the flow of the book, explaining the particular course of its journey through a field of audience research traversable via numerous paths.

Academic writing in any discipline is a matter of pragmatism and strategy. First year undergraduate and university professor alike must constantly bridge the gap between the quantity of work that has been written on a topic, and the amount of time available to ingest it. In my own situation, I have decided to concentrate *Investigating Audiences* on a review of largely (but not exclusively) post-1999 research. I have chosen to do this since the last decade has seen many fine surveys of audience studies (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1999; Brooker & Jermyn, 2002; Nightingale, 1996; Schroder et al., 2002). Given this state of affairs, it seemed the best course of action was to try to write a different sort of book. So, the contemporary focus I offer is intended as a contrast, but not a conflict, that draws on the reception and reconsideration of my earlier work.

And, I must acknowledge, this tactic bears dangers. Audience studies did not drop out of the sky at some time toward the end of the last century. So it is necessary to reprise the main arguments of *Understanding Audiences* to give a sense of why this project takes its present shape. In particular, this relates to the way that the nexus between media and social power is conceptualized, which in turn informs how this book deals with matters of method.

If I were forced to explain the earlier work with recourse to only two scholars, Stuart Hall and George Gerbner would be my selections. The major methodological argument made in *Understanding Audiences* was that quantitative methods had a role to play in the critical analysis of relations between culture, popular culture and social power. To illustrate, I argued that similarities in the way that Gerbner and Hall theorized the mass communication process manifested the error of equating the qualitative/quantitative distinction with that made by Lemert (1989) between critical and administrative research. That is, *Understanding Audiences* was researched and written at a time where many assumed that statistics based devices, such as surveys and experiments, were mostly used by scholars who accepted the existing distribution of political, economic and social power. Harold Lasswell, an early pioneer in North American Mass communication research which institutionalized the experiment and survey as the tools par excellence for understanding media and audience power, had written: 'among all who share the traditions of America, the problem is not whether democracy ought to live, but how' (1953: 1975: 469). To critical scholars like Stuart Hall (1982) and Todd Gitlin (1978) statements like this avoided more important questions such as what and who defined democracy, and what happened to the people living without its limits so established. This, in their eyes, reduced the study of media and audiences to the question of how an assumed democracy could be sold via the strategic manipulation of discrete messages, or how 'bad' media could upset society's balance. As a result,

a systemic analysis of how media functioned as ideological vehicles was avoided.

Gerbner's cultivation analysis had been painted as part of the problem. Originating in a series of content analyses of primetime US television in the 1960s and 1970s, cultivation analysis pointed to survey-identified correlations between the prevalence of media violence and the tendency for heavy television viewers to believe that the real world was far rougher than was truly the case. That its numbers asserted danger perception increased with the hours a person spent in front of 'the box' led some to accuse Gerbner of resurrecting the 'hypodermic' effects theory, where audiences are powerless to resist incontrovertible media messages (Gauntlett, 1998; Wober, 1998). That it was initially funded by the US Surgeon General's Office who was eager to find a scapegoat for escalating social unrest in late 1960s America (Ball-Rokeach, 2001) coloured Gerbner's work in administrative hues.

Entering postgraduate education to explore cultural studies, which favours qualitative methods of explaining culture in action, I would probably have been happy to follow along with this critique, had I not enrolled in a PhD programme at the University of Massachusetts whose core requirements insisted that I should read the mass communications dinosaurs, Gerbner included. Grudgingly doing so, I was struck by similarities between cultivation theory and Hall's encoding/decoding model (1980), which was then commonly selected as the cornerstone for empirical audience research within British Cultural Studies. To begin, in their studies of the effects of television violence, Gerbner and his colleagues had reached the conclusion that the consequences of media representation had more to do with the stabilization of existing political power structures than the production of aberrant behaviours. Violence was:

A dramatic demonstration of the power of certain individuals (which led to) a tendency to assume high levels of violence; to acquiesce to the use of violence by others (and) ... a sense of fear and need for protection (Gerbner et al., 1978: 184).

This shifted the question of media influence toward the matter of how structural media relations tended to produce politically loaded visions of reality; time and time again:

Any message is a socially and historically determined expression of concrete physical and social relationships. Messages imply propositions, assumptions and points of view that are understandable only in terms of the social relationships and contexts in which they are produced. Yet they also reconstitute those relationships and contexts. Messages thus sustain the structures and practices that produce them (Morgan & Shanahan, 1996: 4).

4 INVESTIGATING AUDIENCES

Because media messages, as agents of already existent structures and beliefs, had the primary function of maintaining what is, rather than the production of change, so too it was necessary to revisit the logic of statistical interpretation. Faced with the criticism that cultivation analysis was founded on the location of relatively small differences between 'heavy' and 'light' television viewers, Gerbner and his team offered the following retort:

The observable independent contributions of television can only be relatively small. But just as an average shift of a few degrees can lead to an ice age ... so too can a relatively small but pervasive influence make a crucial difference. The size of an effect is far less critical than the direction of its steady influence (Gerbner et al., 1980: 14).

The reason why this attracted my attention was that the arguments being made appeared entirely compatible with a cultural studies position. In the US, the move from mass communication to interpretive approaches to culture was signalled by James Carey's distinction between researching the ritual as against the informational function of communication. By the above quotes, cultivation clearly strode into the latter camp. However, in articulating this position within a concern for structural media relations, Gerbner & co also connected with Hall's interest in hegemony. The argument in both camps was that media power came in the form of winning consent for particular political arrangements via the social and economic relations of message production and circulation.

I felt that this was an important argument to make since the common-sense relations between quantitative methods and administrative questions appeared to ignore the historical context of mass communication during and after the Second World War. If scholars had been led by the interests of government and media industries, this was hardly surprising given the realities of research funding and the fact that many of them had been drafted into the US military to seek out the propaganda 'magic bullet' that would persuade GI s to fight (for an interesting account of this period, see Peters, 1996a; 1996b). Nor was Gerbner's failure to explore theoretical compatibility with European neo-Marxist scholarship especially shocking given his teaching position in a major US university in the 1950s and 1960s. This being the case, cultivation analysis played a major role in *Understanding Audiences* as a vehicle for arguing that quantitative methods were not inherently hostile to the idea and analysis of culture.

Several years on, that argument is accepted in both principle and practice (although I am not the only person who was making it; see for example Lewis, 1997). As we shall see, many important figures in the development of critical qualitative audience research have turned to the survey as a means

of addressing the media's social relevance. Additionally, it is also worth noting that qualitative methods have become influential within the 'administrative'. Anthropologist Greg McCracken has built a lucrative career using ethnographic methods to tell corporations like Coca-Cola how consumers attach meaning to their product (2006). He argues that industry has become methodologically agnostic; it seems that media studies has adopted the same attitude.

However, there is another reason why I felt a new book rather than a second edition was in order. In the new empirical research I have been doing, I have found many of the ideas that emanated from the integration of Gerbner and Hall either unhelpful or inappropriate. In part, this is due to a certain contradiction in the way that power was conceived. Addressing the perceived clash between Hall's deployment of ideology, and Foucault's development of the idea of discourse, I had attempted a rapprochement in arguing that the latter encouraged the analysis of power through close empirical analysis of small case studies. However, as the book was largely a review of other people's research, in writing *Understanding Audiences* I was never forced to engage with what, pragmatically, this might mean. Recently, I have been involved in a number of studies on the phenomenon of anti-social behaviour and the way that it is publicly understood and discussed in the UK. This has involved working with many 'institutional' forces. In one meeting, the fear was expressed that media coverage of Asb was worsening the problem by creating a 'moral panic' around youth. The words did not come from my mouth, but were uttered by a high-ranking member of the local Fire Service. In this event, situating critical theory as something that exists outside of governmental institutions, or assuming a symbiosis of interest between media and state, would not have helped the project.

Of course, it is hardly reasonable to expect 30-year-old scholarship to map contemporary cultural geography. Gerbner was very explicit in stating that his work was tied to a US televisual context, where the medium was the vastly dominant game in town, tied to the relatively narrow range of production sites characterizing the broadcast era. This environment also complimented an encoding/decoding model heavily influenced by Louis Althusser's work on 'ideological state apparatus', which assumed goodness-of-fit between media and various forms of governance. So, the decision to centre *Understanding Audiences* on these ideas exacted a price. The book tended to cast power as a function of meaning in an explicitly ideological sense which detracted from the consideration of cultural relevance. It also tended to ignore other academic trajectories. In particular, the decision to argue for a certain symbiosis between mass communication and cultural studies diluted the space given to exploring issues in critical audience studies.

Matt Hills (2004) has written that scholarship often rests on matters of faith; rather like religious zealots, media academics have a belief in certain theorists and theories that, in practice, remain beyond analysis. In his exceptionally well written book on media and gender, David Gauntlett (2002) offers proof in stating that given the choice between believing that people are essentially good and want to do the right thing versus the reverse proposition, he prefers the former option. In the same spirit, my grounding in Gerbner and Hall means that I find it difficult not to be a 'glass is half empty' sort of researcher. However, by situating this book in the ideas and practical problems of current scholarship that appears less marked by 'grand narratives' of media influence, my goal is to present a study that challenges assumptions about audiences/media relations. The task is to unravel what we know. Loose ends are good things.

This book begins and ends with me. Or, to be more precise, with the sort of research I do, how I do it and why I do it *as an operator within an academic discipline*. That is, although the fact that I am writing this book influences the things that it says, at the same time what I study and what I say is affected by external forces; what are my colleagues interested in? How can I get into the conversation? What does society care about? How can I attract research funding by connecting with these concerns? And over and above this, how is it possible to say something meaningful about culture that someone, somewhere will find useful?

The following chapters make of scholarly conversations about media and audiences within the context of my own empirical studies. Readers may be struck by the attention I have paid to my own experiences in a book that is supposed to be about ways of doing research. Chapter one legitimates this decision by showing the importance of remembering that research is always conducted by a specific person in a particular place and time, while simultaneously establishing core questions that audience researchers are obliged to consider. Chapters two and three explore 'information' and 'meaning' as both central and problematic cornerstones in audience research. Although the former is often related to unhelpful 'transmission' communication models, I argue that recent developments in narrative based research return to normative questions about learning. This signals opportunities to re-engage with traditional questions about how media can edify, or rather enable inclusive public cultures; a question that is fundamental to all that follows. Chapter three develops this theme by exploring the political dimensions of entertainment. Here, politics is conceived as a broad reference to the processes through which audiences become social, even in apparently meaningless media experiences. To close the 'mapping' section of the book, the chapter on fan scholarship develops the idea of the political by framing fan discourses within the issue of democratic speech.

I then move on to more topic centred considerations, inspired by major subjects in the field and also my experiences of the sorts of questions that tend to get asked about the social impact of media. The intention is both to summarize these areas and suggest avenues for different approaches to the same topics, illustrated by some of my own projects. No audience scholar can avoid the topics of sex and violence. Critical scholars have usually taken the position that their primary role in these discussions is to look at the poverty of evidence claiming to show how pornography and violent media have negative behavioural consequences. Looking at relations between media use and perceptions of alcohol abuse in the UK, I argue that it is possible to draw connections between media violence and the development of unhelpful social attitudes without succumbing to behaviourist thinking. That is, one can accept that, for the reasons explored in chapters one to four, media influence is an uneven and often unobservable process, without concluding that it is impossible to engage with practical questions. Here, a critique of direct effects thinking is used to inform research on how drinkers use media to make sense of alcohol-related violence.

The chapter on celebrity and reality media draws on a project on public readings of 'star' politicians to show how the ideas developed on information, narrative, pleasure and citizen/fan parallels can be applied to the sphere of politics proper. Additionally, I argue that these topics are indicative of deeper issues in media theory relating to the shift toward a multimedia environment where distinctions between media and interpersonal communication are no longer as clear as they once were. This is important as it explains why the theoretical basis of *Understanding Audiences* is no longer adequate, given the fluidity of relations between the public and institutions, media and other.

What emerges from this is a decentred notion of media power grounded in the work of Nick Couldry. Couldry's idea that life should be seen as media related rather than media centred creates a challenge for the sorts of things that audience researchers should study. To explain, in the final chapter I show how this shift has influenced my work on young people and media. A current projects uses survey data, qualitative interviewing, participant observation and creative research techniques to study youth outreach programmes staged by an English regional fire service. One of the goals of these programmes is to reduce fire offending by improving lines of communication between firefighters and young people. The initial idea of the project was to examine how face-to-face contact could overcome problematic media representations of both groups. However, it has rapidly become clear that 'media' cannot be defined in opposition to other sorts of communication, not least because a) images of firefighting from television and film do not seem very important to the young people and b) media are used *in* the

programme as a means of changing public perceptions of *both* the Fire Service *and* young people. This is important as the fire service's work is happening in the context of general public distrust of young people sparked by fears over anti-social behaviour. I end with this topic as an illustration of how the general themes identified in audience research feed into an actual research project, and how a multimethod approach is vital as any techniques that look good on paper can prove a spectacular disaster in the field. In this sense, *Investigating Audiences* takes an 'embedded' approach to method, dealing with practical issues as they arise from conceptual applications.

The path I have chosen reflects the fact that my training in mass communication has left an enduring interest in normative questions about communication and problem solving, particularly in the areas of electoral politics and public health. That is, I tend to study questions falling under the broad rubric of how media can be used as a basis for healthier, more inclusive public cultures. However, one cannot explore these issues without accounting for popular culture; areas of media that common sense would place beyond the bounds of learning and rational debate. So another way to think about the book's organization is to consider how the chapters on news and information, pleasure, fans and celebrity/reality expand the bounds of learning and what we understand to be the political, and the way that audiences engage with public debates. What these chapters do is establish the argument that although we should still expect media to function as learning resources, we need to understand that learning involves pleasure and emotion, and as such apparently trivial aspects of media culture, for good or ill, have an important impact on how we understand and participate in social life. In this, the intention is to direct some of the issues that scholars of the popular have pursued back toward the study of relations between media and democracy. As an example, from my perspective fan studies are useful as they allow us to reflect on the sorts of citizenship one can expect within today's media cultures. The point of asking these questions is to create a platform from which critical audience research can be seen to engage with matters of media and public policy.

1 Can I Write ‘I’ in an Essay?

WHERE TO BEGIN?

1.1 In a content analysis of major mass communication journals spanning the years 1956–2000, Bryant and Miron (2004) discovered that of the 1806 analyses of media matters sampled, 576 included 1393 references to a staggering 604 theories. Given this complexity, it is easy to see how audience research can appear a haphazard affair. Alternatively, we can appreciate the variety of conceptual and methodological opportunities in the field. But what we do have to recognize, pragmatically, is that the multiplicity of gateways to audience research means that circumstance and serendipity influence the questions that a researcher will ask, and the techniques that he or she will use to find answers. Think of this in terms of the ‘Five Ws’ often defined as the basic elements of a good news story: ‘what’ researchers study and ‘why’ they do so is influenced by ‘who’ they are, ‘where’ they are, and ‘when’ they are working. Yet this is a not particularly radical claim to make; it simply describes the reality of any ‘expert’ field. The ‘Five Ws’ indicate three questions that can be generally used as a starting point. What is it that we do not know about relations between audience and media? How do social, cultural, political and educational experiences influence the things we want to study? Where do the answers to these queries intersect?

The first question is inspired by Helen Nowotny’s take on the fragility of expertise (2003). Referencing science, Nowotny argues that the contemporary world confronts the expert with a number of challenges. Now more than ever, he or she is publicly accountable; that is, he or she must communicate with audiences beyond the circle of fellow experts, and as such faces challenges from other sorts of authority. In the instance of genetics, by way of illustration, we recognize that moral and ethical issues often rank aside technical ones. For Nowotny, being an expert thus involves a certain abdication, where we publicly confess that we cannot provide quick, clear solutions to social enigmas. This has a direct relevance to a media studies discipline that addresses a number of sharp public concerns. What are video games doing to kids? Why are we so obsessed with celebrities? Have the media killed politics by talking about personalities rather than policies?

Under interrogation, the best and most useful responses can focus on what we *don't* know about public/media interactions.

In a sense, our task as scholars is to complicate understanding of what the media 'do'. Largely, this is due to the way that a number of contestable conclusions about media effects have passed unchallenged into the common sense of public opinion and media policy. Accordingly, this chapter will review a number of traditions within communications research that have set out to unravel not only what we apparently 'know' about audiences, but also the very act of scholarship. The term 'communications', rather than media, mass communications or cultural studies, is used for two reasons. First, it will become clear that mediated and non-mediated communications overlap; it is often difficult to tell where media end and everyday life begins. Second, many of the methods that have become popular in audience studies are rooted in other social research forms. Issues arising in these areas help media scholars to understand their own activities.

Appreciating the context of expertise is a vital part of 'unlearning'. It is easy to conceive scholarship as an anonymous process. Straying beyond the theories and methods to the *history* of communications scholarship, we discover that time, place and resources influence how we arrive at scholarly 'conclusions'. This chapter will consider what this means for the audience 'expert' by examining a question that undergraduates often direct at lecturers: 'Can I use "I" in an essay?' The answer is 'yes', as long as one understands that the 'I' here refers to the scholarly self, as a recognition of the responsibilities entailed in working within a certain academic parameters. However, while cultural studies has formed the vanguard for the foregrounding of academic subjectivity, I will also argue that in paying insufficient attention to the context of mass communications research, it has generated a number of erroneous conclusions about what scholars who use quantitative experimental and survey research are trying to do and say. Overcoming this prejudice by understanding the historical genesis of mass communications research expands the methodological opportunities open to critical audience researchers. Davison's theory of the 'third person effect' (1983) will be used in elucidation, as an example of a numerically based paradigm that sets out to further knowledge by deconstructing its own facts.

AN OBVIOUS PLACE TO START: MEDIA AND BAD BEHAVIOUR

1.2 Consider the following quote:

I'm 16, I love modern music and freedom of expression, but having listened to Eminem, I must say I was deeply disturbed, not by the language but the content.

He seems to be becoming an idol for those younger than me, a fact which I am not comfortable with. Should Eminem be banned? No. But stronger controls on the music that young children are allowed to buy need to be introduced. (Nigel, 2001) (news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/talking_point/1158016.stm. Accessed 9 February 2005.)

Nigel's comments were a reaction to Sheffield University Student Union's decision to ban US rapper Eminem from their facilities during his 2001 UK tour. At the time, many had expressed concerns over his homophobic and violent lyrics. The BBC asked audiences how they felt about this decision, prompting Nigel's comments.

What would a cultural studies audience expert say to Nigel? How can we use his words as evidence in debates on media effects? With regard to the first question, Richard Butsch offers the following:

[cultural studies] focuses on actual audiences in natural settings rather than theoretically or laboratory constructed audiences. In situating audiences in their social and historical context, we may understand media use as well as contemporary interpretations of media use. This helps to highlight audience practices rather than media effects. It also helps to recognize that audience–medium interactions are embedded in other social relations and cultural practices (2003: 16)

Butsch's definition grounds the cultural studies critique of the idea that media have negative behavioural effects on certain sorts of 'weak' people. In its first edition, *Particip@tions* (the first academic journal to focus exclusively on audiences) published a review of the media violence controversy. Signed by a number of leading media scholars, the article contended that most quantitative experimental audience studies show no behavioural or causal relations between media and real world violence, and those that do are conceptually and/or methodologically flawed. Consequently:

researchers' attempts to reduce the myriad effects of art and entertainment to numerical measurements and artificial laboratory experiments are not likely to yield useful insights about the way that viewers actually use popular culture. Likewise, in a field as complex as human aggression, it is questionable whether quantitative studies can ever provide an adequately nuanced description of the interacting influences that cause some people to become violent. (*Particip@tions*, 1. www.participations.org/volume%201/issue%201/1_01_amici_contents.htm St. Louis Court Brief, 2003.)

Taken in combination, Butsch and the St. Louis collaborators cast audience research as a qualitative, interpretive exercise, involving the study of human subjects who are irreducible to sequences of objectively observable causes and effects. Applied to the Eminem comment, we might say that Nigel failed to consider the context in which younger listeners might have encountered the rapper. His lyrical focus assumed that children, or anyone, for that matter, were paying attention and, if so, comprehended what they heard.

Both assumptions are problematic. When Dr. Dre states: ‘if I got my niner you know I’m straight trippin’ on 1993’s *Nuthin but a ‘G’ Thang*, I understand the words, but I have no idea what he is talking about.

Nigel’s comments have significance, then, as part of the familiar tendency to displace effects onto other people, based on a number of unsubstantiated conclusions about how certain sorts of audiences relate to the media. It is, to use Karl Schoenbach’s (2001) work, ‘mythic’. Nigel accepted a number of contestable hypotheses about media effects as matters of fact. Reviewing centuries of apocalyptic predications on everything from the book to the internet, Schoenbach identifies a number of recurrent themes which are:

- A desire to discern clear cause and effect sequences.
- A focus on *negative* influence, from Plato’s fears that reading would destroy memory, to 17th century Dutch concerns about newspapers and the erosion of respect for authority, to Wertham’s study (1955) of links between comic books and teen delinquency in the 1950s.
- A focus on psychological factors; the role that media can play in provoking aggression, fear etc.
- Physiological concerns. In the 1970s it was widely feared that television damaged eyesight.

All are based on a fundamental fear about the anonymous mass. People out there, apparently, cannot help but embrace any new media temptation on offer, and have no power to influence what these experiences do to them. The trouble is, the myths are harmful, as they invert the research process. According to their logic, we already know what the media do and who they do it to; the researcher’s task is simply to labour the point. Using Schoenbach’s ideas, a cultural studies audience researcher would confront Nigel by dismantling many of the facts that he accepted. The expert would point out that:

- It is NOT obvious that children are more susceptible to media influence than adults. This assumption makes all sorts of ham-fisted conflation between different sorts of texts, media and influences.
- It is NOT obvious that the most pressing audience questions surround violence.
- It is NOT obvious that the primary impact of media violence is real world violent behaviour.
- It is NOT obvious that media influence, if it happens at all, will declare itself in material behaviours that are observable, hence measurable. For this same reason
- It is NOT obvious that we should be able to reproduce and thus analyze connections between media and behaviour in controlled academic settings.
- In the notion of effects, it is NOT obvious what effects are or where we should find them.