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Reviews

□ Blumler, Jay G., Dennis Mc Quail & J. R. Brown: 'The Conduct of Exploratory Research into the Social Origins of Broadcasting Audiences'

Particip@tions Volume 1, Issue 1 (November 2003)

Foreword

Why we are publishing this article - Martin Barker (Editor)

Ever since this Journal was first conceived of, it has been the ambition of its founders to do more than just publish fresh research and argument – important though this unquestionably is. We hoped that the Journal could perform a number of other roles, which together could contribute to the health and development of our broad field of research. Among these was to find and publish 'lost' significant pieces of audience research. They might be lost for a number of reasons. It could be because they were published in obscure places, now hard to reach. Or it might be because they originated as commercial or equivalent researches, and only now – perhaps a long time after their completion – have they passed a point of confidentiality or sensitivity. Or it could be that circumstances just made them hard to publish at the time of their completion. For example, one problem with substantial pieces of research can be their sheer length – which can be a barrier to full print publication. But of course these problems just do not apply to web publication where there are no immediate space restrictions – and this of course was one among our many motives for favouring this form of publication.

From Issue 1 of the Journal we are able to fulfil that ambition. We here publish the first of what we intend to be a long line of such 'recovered' pieces of research. It has never been published before. How it came to light, is relevant to the importance we believe it has.

In 1995-6 I was involved in a research project, funded by the British Economic and Social Research Council, into the audiences for action-adventure movies, and focused through the recently-released film *Judge Dredd*. I was assisted by a research assistant, Kate Brooks. In the course of the research Kate and I found ourselves struggling to find resources that could help us think through how it might be possible to conceptualise, and thence turn into a researchable phenomenon, the fact of *pleasure* in a film. In the course of thinking about these issues, we revisited the work of the Uses and Gratifications researchers who at least attempted to capture the different ways in which audiences can gain satisfaction from the media. Our problem was that it wasn't clear to us *how* the researchers had generated their gratification categories – and therefore could not see how we might perhaps adapt their procedures to our own research circumstances. We knew that a key player in this research tradition had been Jay Blumler, who by this time was retired although still immensely active on research and conference circuits.

When we made contact with Jay, he welcomed us with great kindness and answered all our questions very fully. And when we explained our problem, he dug out and allowed us to borrow his surviving copy of an unpublished research report to which he had

contributed – a report which told the story of how exactly, in the late 1960s, his group of researchers had attempted to formulate, and then test, a set of research instruments for accessing and measuring audience satisfactions, and also for exploring their relations with people's socio-economic positions. The report was long (78 pages of typescript), and extraordinarily detailed (some of the Tables it included were dense, and certainly beyond my capacity to 'read' them). It was also completely fascinating. It was fascinating both as a historical document – so this is how they went about their business! This is how, concretely, the Uses and Gratifications Tradition evolved and tested those measures which are now largely ignored and dismissed, yet which have a concreteness and groundedness which, if we are honest, we could die for. It was also fascinating for its methodological bravura. Perhaps this resonates particularly strongly right now, as quite a number of researchers are reconsidering the ways in which it may be possible – perhaps necessary – to combine quantitative and qualitative modes of research.

At the very least this report reveals some very striking things about the Uses and Gratifications tradition of audience research – and should help us evaluate that tradition more generously than many of us, recently. But perhaps there are more concrete 'recoveries' to be made from looking closely at this sterling attempt to address some large and difficult (theoretical, methodological, empirical) issues. It does in our view repay close and serious attention and we are delighted to be allowed by Jay Blumler to publish it.

One caveat: although the report is complete in terms of its argument, it lacks an Appendix which contained a lot of the raw data of the projects it discusses. We do not see this as a barrier to its usefulness. If subsequently the material in the Appendix becomes available to us, we will add it here – yet another benefit of web publication of course!

