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

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Chapter 1

Introduction: Approaching the Study of Audience Gratifications

1. This report provides a detailed account of the first exploratory phase of a project, which is supported by the Social Science Research Council and based in the Centre for Television Research of the University of Leeds, in order to prepare the ground for a major investigation of the social origins of the gratifications associated with television viewing. It describes the activities of a three-man research team (Dr. Jay G. Blumler, Dr. Denis McQuail and Mr J. R. Brown, of whom the latter was fully employed on the project) during the period from January 1969 to September 1970. It was preceded a) in November 1969 by an interim report, which mainly summarised some of the findings from a single programme study and b) in September 1970 by a conceptual overview of the field of investigation together with an outline of proposals for the design of a second-stage national survey.

2. Although the considerations which comprise the main thesis of the project lie at the centre of public debate about mass communications, they have hitherto received little systematic research attention. They concern the interaction between the television audience member and the content of the medium. The project is based on the assumption that while some viewing behaviour is incidental, much of it can also be fitted to an underlying structure of goal-directed activity. Its approach cuts across the boundaries between sociology and psychology and brings together disparate concepts and theories. The clearest division within the territory it covers is between a focus, on the one hand, on individual differences in satisfactions sought from the mass media, and a concern, on the other hand, to specify the consequences of differential positions in a structured society for media use. The distinction serves also to identify the project's unifying purpose, for the investigators have striven to bring together and relate sets of data collected in accordance with these alternative perspectives. That purpose is to operationalise and test a proposition which states (in the words of Robert Merton) that:

Gratifications derived from mass communications are not merely psychological; they are also a production of the distinctive social roles of those who make use of those communications.^[1]

3. The assumptions a) that media content is used in quite different ways by different people and b) that these differences reflect variations in need related to personality and

social position belong to the so-called 'uses and gratifications' tradition of mass communications research. This approach to media studies has had a chequered history over a period of 30 years. Although early work in America indicated its high potential, the tradition subsequently made few advances on the achievements of its originators and must still be regarded more as an orientation than as a coherent research approach, if by the latter is implied the existence of a set of hypotheses and a mature methodology. Many media content foci (e.g. newspapers, adventure comics, science fiction stories, radio serials, etc) have intimated the existence of complex functional relationships with the audience, yet much qualitative work has lacked quantitative confirmation, and the quantitative evidence that has been generated has typically lacked a firm qualitative base. In part the failure to fulfil its latent promise can be blamed on the orientation itself. The expression, 'uses and gratifications', tended to become reified and served as a substitute for considered concepts of analytical value and theoretical rigour. Thus, although many avenues were explored, the results added up to little more than a discrete and scattered listing and discussion of a host of possible media functions. The qualitative and quantitative approaches had neither coalesced nor been guided by a framework of theoretical postulates.

By way of illustration, the sociologist, Herbert Gans, was able to write some years ago of the 'action film' as a media form that is 'not only exciting and entertaining but ... also a dramatic projection of adolescent aspiration-fantasy'^[2], without pausing to consider how such a potentially fruitful insight might be operationalised. Similarly, in an early and still much-cited study of the functions of a newspaper, Bernard Berelson stopped short at a subjective analysis of sixty intensive interviews with readers who were temporarily deprived of their daily fare by a strike.^[3] Herta Herzog's studies of daytime radio serial listeners^[4] are perhaps closest in initial approach to some of the investigations recently conducted at Leeds, but the theoretical and methodological potential of her findings were never exploited. In fact in 1940 Herzog herself recommended advance in this tradition through the adoption of a three-pronged approach, combining content analysis, qualitative gratification research and quantitative research into audience members' positions in the social structure.^[5] Here the lack of reference to the possibility and desirability of quantifying the investigation of gratifications themselves is marked. The danger of separating an intensive study of certain media users' gratifications from a quantitative investigation lies in the risk of concluding, without warrant, that types of people known to compose the audience uniformly seek the gratifications believed, from a small-scale study, to be associated with a particular category of content. At the other extreme, there has been a tendency to feed single-sentence descriptions of media functions to samples of the public for endorsement, as in Gans' study of the educational functions of television,^[6] the investigation of the influence of alienation on media use by McLeod, Ward and Tancill^[7] and even the Schramm, Lyle and Parker exploration of the functions of television for children.^[8] Unfortunately, these descriptions, and the implied functions, tend to be generated by the researchers themselves, and they may miss or

misrepresent the actual views of the audience members as they relate to certain kinds of content. For surveys to produce valid results, they must be closely linked in conception and implementation with the language and the range of experiences of the population under study.

4. The theoretical and methodological challenges posed by the record of past work in this field have been taken up in the present research, which seeks to integrate the divergent tendencies in the uses and gratifications tradition of study. The investigators have accepted the need to generate theory out of empirical evidence, while beginning with a provisional conceptual framework.

When a project proposal was originally submitted to the Social Science Research Council, the first stage of activity was conceived as requiring a set of 300 semi-structured interviews, which would be based largely on open-ended questions designed to elicit information relevant to the satisfactions sought from four types of television programme:

- a. Dramatic serials in the crime and adventure category
- b. Other dramatic serials (particularly those which emphasise realistic settings)
- c. Quizzes
- d. Current affairs programmes

At that time this phase of the project was interpreted as helping to extend the scope of uses and gratifications evidence in various ways: by simultaneously collecting data germane to several contrasting content areas; by exploiting a specific focus on television (many past gratification studies having been conducted on the patrons of older media); and by investigating British audience members (the uses and gratifications research tradition having flourished mainly in the United States).

Once the project was established, however, it soon became apparent that to advance its objectives it would be necessary to do more than repeat earlier work on a wider scale with a modern medium and in a different social context. The motivational sources of types and patterns of media use would have to be identified in conjunction with studies of the audience member in his or her place in the social structure in order: a) to connect data about audience distributions with data about distributions on the main kinds of gratifications; b) to establish firm inferences about the consequences of social position for the gratifications looked for or derived; and c) to apply relatively powerful statistical models to the inferred relationships.

Consequently, the investigators radically reconsidered and revised their proposed methods of approaching the tasks of the project's first stage. A procedure which utilised the method of semi-structured group discussions in order to produce qualitative data was

envisaged. These data were then to be quantified, experimenting with different formats for presenting gratification items to samples of viewers, and further refined by applying correlational techniques to survey results. It was at this point that the long-running serial, The Dales, was reported to be ending, and for several reasons this appeared to offer a fruitful opportunity to make an initial entry into the field. It will be clear from the body of this report that the exploratory stage of this project has been marked by a succession of innovations and re-evaluations of conception and method, while retaining and reaffirming the basic elements of the original approach. Although a superficial inspection of the record of work accomplished might convey an impression of improvisation (which is not entirely inappropriate in exploratory endeavour), the investigators believe that significant progress has been achieved on a number of connected fronts, resulting in the formulation of an empirically grounded conceptual framework and the design of a battery of tried procedures for questioning, measurement and data analysis.

5. The gradual and interdependent development of methodology and theory is recorded in the rest of this report in a series of four chapters. Chapter 2 provides a detailed account of the Dales study, including the reasons for embarking on it, the procedures designed for it, and the findings that emerged from it. But altogether three surveys, incorporating (for economy reasons) six programme studies, were mounted in an 18-month period. Therefore, Chapter 3 describes the studies of the viewers of Coronation Street and quiz programmes which formed the core of the second survey. And Chapter 4 describes three foci of the third survey – studies of the gratifications associated with news viewing, The Saint and Callan – which were designed partly as investigations in their own right and partly to cater for the project's typological requirements. At the same time that these individual studies were being planned, executed and analysed, however, the investigators kept in mind the project's eventual need for a so-called general instrument (one that could assess the gratifications which audience members seek from the medium of television as a whole rather than from a specific programme). Chapter 5 outlines the stages through which that concern developed and describes the data-collection technique that emerged from this process.

[1] Merton, R. K, 'Patterns of influence', in Lazarsfeld, Paul F and Stanton, F. N. (eds), Communications Research 1948-9, Harper, New York 1949.

[2] Gans, Herbert, 'Hollywood Films on the British Screen: An Analysis of the Functions of American Popular Culture Abroad', Social Problems, Vol. IX, 1962, pp. 324-8.

[3] Berelson, Bernard, 'What "Missing the Newspaper" Means', in Lazarsfeld, Paul F, and Stanton, F. N., op. cit.

[4] Herzog, Herta, 'What Do We Really Know About Daytime Serial Listeners?', in Lazarsfeld, Paul F. and Stanton, Frank N (eds.), Radio Research, 1942-43, Duell, Sloan and Pearce, New York, 1944.

[5] Herzog, Hertaq, 'Professor Quiz: A Gratification Study', in Lazarsfeld, Paul F., Radio and the Printed Page, Duell, Sloan and Pearce, New York, 1940.

[6] Gans, Herbert, The Uses of Television and their Educational Implication, Centre for Urban Studies, New York, 1968.

[7] McLeod, Jack M., Ward, Scott and Tancill, Kevin, 'Alienation and the Uses of the Mass Media', Public Opinion Quarterly, Vol. XXIX, 1965-6, pp. 583-94.

[8] Schramm, Wilbur, Lyle, Jack and Parker, Edwin B., Television in the Lives of our Children, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1961.

