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'Editorial Introduction'

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Editorial Introduction

It is with great pleasure that I take this opportunity to introduce both myself, as new co-editor of *Particip@tions*, and this, the latest issue of the journal. When Martin Barker invited me on behalf of the Board to become more involved, I hesitated for just a moment while my world re-oriented itself around what this might mean. Located as I am in Australia (although I was born in the North East of England), the possibility that I might be able to contribute from afar and perhaps engage more colleagues on this side of the world in the project that is *Particip@tions*, was an immediate incentive. The fact that the journal is on-line was another major attraction, that and the fact that I always have a ten-hour head start on my British colleagues according to Greenwich meantime.

In terms of my own interest in the area of audience and reception studies, I became involved in the field when I came to Australia in 1984 as an international postgraduate student with a burning desire to understand the role of the media in the lives of young people. A former secondary school teacher, I began my research in a Department of Education which had a very jaundiced view of the media and Media Studies in general. Nevertheless, they recognised the value of participant observation, and so I spent one year in a school learning just how hard it is to manage an ethnography, and a great many more years tussling with the data and how to write it up.

One of the first academic essays I read back then which suggested to me that there might be another way of thinking about the media than the old effects model which had so dominated the construction of audience text relationships – especially with regard to young people – is the article by Donald Horton and R. Richard Wohl on the topic of 'Mass Communication and Para-Social Interaction' which we have 'recovered' in this issue. Although many of the ideas it rehearses may be very familiar now, I still find the concept useful and a pertinent reminder that some scholars were indeed finding new ways to think through audience-text relationships in the early days of television. That the concept still has legs, is proven by the fact that as I was writing up this introduction, I was rung by a newspaper to be asked about the impact of the latest celebrity scandal unfolding in the media in Melbourne. 'Why', the reporter asked me, 'does it matter that our television celebrity had an affair?' 'Why do people seem to be so upset?'

I looked at the books on my shelf about culture and celebrity, and then thought about Horton and Wohl. 'Well', I replied, 'it all starts with the concept of parasocial interaction, the fact that many people have an imagined and on-going personal relationship with this media persona ... and they now have to re-think how they see him. It may be as if a close friend had made a sudden and shocking revelation'. We then got into the possible

difference between fictional and real characters, performance on reality TV, and what engages audiences in the lives of others, all issues with which audience and reception studies routinely deals.

In other words, every day the media self-reflexively speculates about what the media might mean for the people who consume it, without really having any idea. And so the journalists and investigators turn to the academics whom they think will have the answers – because at least they might have done more research than simply to look at the ratings or sales figures. Not a week goes by that I do not get a call which asks me to explain the relationship between a certain text or media form and a particular audience in a particular context. I may not have all the answers, but at least what I try to offer is a way of thinking about that relationship which avoids simplistic assumptions. Given this on-going interest and demand for information, I therefore consider audience and reception studies to be one of the most important areas of media research today. That's why I am particularly delighted to be involved in promoting and encouraging such research and debate through the very valuable forum provided by *Particip@tions*.

Along with the essay by Horton and Wohl, this issue also includes the second half of Martin Barker's long essay on audience responses to *Straw Dogs*, an essay by Dawn Lewcock on the addressed audience in Elizabethan theatre, and an article by Alexander Dhoust on collective memories of early Flemish television fiction. Each essay offers a valuable and very different way of thinking about audiences. Such is the broad scope and project that is *Particip@tions*.

Additional note by Martin Barker

I was delighted to be able to invite Sue to become joint editor with me, at the specific request of the Editorial Board. The work of editing the Journal is growing, and we believe that Sue's contribution will be invaluable – as an experienced researcher herself, and also as someone working in another part of the world. In the eyes of the Board, it is vital that the Journal proves itself to be entirely international.

On another matter, we hope soon to be able to host via *Particip@tions*' website the archive of materials from the online journal *Intensities*. For various reasons, *Intensities* has had to cease production, but in its short life it published some very valuable essays. We have agreed with the Editor that these should be made available for the future through this Journal, for ease and continuity of access. They will remain distinct, but a direct link will be available from our 'Past Issues' page. Watch that space.

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