

Editorial

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This is an unusually personal editorial comment. As we approached this sixteenth issue (across eight years) of *Participations*, I hit my 65th birthday. A landmark for me, and an opportunity for my university to effectively terminate my employment ... Which is inevitably raising some complicated questions about the future location and direction of the Journal. I return to those in a moment.

Over my lifetime in academic work, I have been engaged directly in audience research – of very many kinds – for nearly thirty years. But if I take in the period in which I was working out what was missing, and getting to understand both why audience research is so important, and learning how it might be done, it is longer again. I grew up within a framework of debates initiated by the rise of cultural studies, and its varied encounters with political and theoretical questions. Early on – as late as the mid-1970s – I became seriously concerned that there were tendencies within the then dominant cultural studies approaches and concepts which veered to a curious intellectual elitism, and which contentedly presumed and prejudged – on the basis of textual and ideological analyses – how people (call them audiences or not) would understand and react to circulating ideas, images, and media.

Like very many of us who have found ourselves conducting audience research, I had no training in its history, procedures, methods, or debates. Indeed, I had no background in empirical research of any kinds – this is something I have had to learn ‘on the fly’. As I did, I came both to respect the difficulties and challenges of designing and conducting good empirical research, as a set of requirements in their own right. But also, because of my more philosophical background, I came to see the complicated ways in which research design, and the concepts presumed and deployed in that process, can not only shape the ways in which people respond, but can also and just as much drive the *researcher* to make assumptions, jump stages, and accept apparent explanatory concepts uncritically.

Over the past twenty years, on many occasions I have looked for a Journal which would engage with the task of developing this field, of cultural studies-inflected audience research. None appeared, and although the number of Journals rose dramatically, few showed anything other than a passing interest in issues of audiences. Some were positively resistant. I therefore started dreaming of creating something myself about twelve years ago. At first, I explored the possibilities of creating this as a print journal. I had discussions with several Journal publishers, but all came to nothing. To be honest, I am now glad that they did. The decision to create *Participations* as an online, free access journal has, I believe, been nothing other than beneficial. It has given us a freedom over issues of timing, size of issues, length of submissions, even an unfussiness about presentational formats, that I hope authors and readers have found refreshing. The decision, too, to follow a suggestion from Milly Williamson – that we develop a system of open refereeing, to try to create a culture in which referees treat all submissions courteously and supportively, however critical they might be – has been a real boon. One of the pleasures of being an Editor of *Participations* is to get emails from authors at the conclusion of editorial considerations, thanking us for the care with which they feel they have been treated.

I believe that in its small way *Participations* has made a difference to the presence, possibilities and future of audience research. Students make use of the Journal, because it is free to use, easy to access, and – just as importantly – generally very clearly and accessibly written. As a Journal, we have seen one important shift in the last three years: an increasing number of approaches from individuals or groups, asking if we would consider carrying a Special Issue on a topic that concerns them. This has become sufficiently frequent that we have now written a set of Notes of Guidance for people who want to work with us. It means that as a Journal we can carry, on new audience and reception topics, the equivalent of an Audience Reader – the Special Issue in this edition is an excellent example of such a thing. But it also means that that ‘Reader’ sits among a range of other work on audience and reception matters, hopefully encouraging some dialogue.

The tendencies which led me, and others, to try to build an audience and reception research tradition are still there. They are there in the ever-present ‘effects’ tradition, whether as a public-moral stance, or as an academic tradition. They are also there in the continuing insistence of many scholars on breezily attributing responses to ‘the viewer’, ‘the spectator’, ‘the reader’, ‘the listener’, and plenty of variants thereon. One thing that has definitely changed over my lifetime in research has been the tremendous growth in methods, and awareness of the complexity of methodological demands. And one of the things we try to do, as a Journal, is to encourage authors to be open and explicit about issues of method and methodology, regardless of implications for word-lengths.

Now, at 65, I hope and plan to continue as one of the Editors for a while longer. But it is possible that the institutional and technical location of the Journal may have to change. I hope very much that there will be no 'disruption of service'. At some point, it will become important for new and younger scholars and researchers to play a role, if the Journal is to continue. I hope very, very much that this will happen. The resource that the Journal has become is too valuable, surely, to be allowed just to stop.

I want, in closing this non-standard Introduction, to give my really genuine thanks to various people. To Sue Turnbull, who is a fabulous Joint Editor to work with. To our two Reviews Editors, Milly Williamson and Clarissa Smith, for keeping that bit of the boat on the waters. To our many Article Editors and Referees, who have taken time over all the submissions and delivered wise and careful comments. And perhaps more than anyone, to our two Production Coordinators, Merris Griffiths for the early issues, and now Rhys Fowler – I have witnessed the amount of work, and the attention to detail that is required for this, and I hope our authors and readers appreciate the work of this as much as I do.