Editorial ~~Introduction~~ Invitation

The above is not a typo. The editors of *Participations* would like to take the unusual step of inviting all our readers, in complete seriousness, to make a contribution to an authentically unique research opportunity – one which, if it works, could make a distinctive difference to the current understanding of audiences, and to how these can be most effectively studied. In December of this year, two closely-related but quite distinct projects will come to fruition. Both are focused around the release of the final film in the *Hobbit* trilogy. Both depend for their success on managing to attract large numbers of survey completions. But each is using a distinctly different methodology. This raises the intriguing possibility that for the first time it will be possible to make a comparison of just how effective two different research methods might be when applied to a large dataset derived from the same object of study. What will each achieve? What will be their relative strengths and limitations?

So, what are the two projects?

One is a second elaboration of the project mounted a decade ago to study responses to the *Lord of the Rings* films. This time, the **World Hobbit Project** is being backed by research teams in 46 countries, and will be recruiting responses in 34 languages. Its broad purpose is to explore the pleasure and meanings of a transmedia fantasy in the lives of its audiences and, through that, to explore the wider role that fantasies play in different cultural contexts. The research implement is a specially designed questionnaire combining and linking quantitative and qualitative questions. The quantitative questions will measure such things as: people's evaluations of the film; their demographic situation; their orientation to the films and (of course) book; and (more broadly) people's membership of communities, and wider interests in fantasy. The qualitative questions will try to get people to explain in their own words what they mean by their quantitative choices. The questionnaire, which will go live on the day the final film is released, will be at this address: www.worldhobbitproject.org.

In 2004, the *Rings* project managed to attract just under 25,000 responses, generating a huge body of data and materials which are still being mined – and are in the public domain for any researcher to use. This time, the organisers hope that, with more than double the number of countries involved, they can well exceed that total. The only funding for the World Hobbit Project has been a small grant from the UK's British Academy which covers the costs of creating website, questionnaire and complex database. It is

therefore dependent on persuading interested people to help us get the project widely known.

The second project, called the **Transnational Comparative Study of Audience Engagements with The Hobbit**, explores the relationships between different modes of reception and relevant aspects of audience members' social and cultural positionings. It maps the evolving typology of Hobbit audiences over the course of the film trilogy by describing the key audience segments, employing a unique online survey instrument that combines Q Methodology with a conventional questionnaire. This research project is informed by an explicitly articulated analytical framework, the Composite Model of Modes of Reception.

The project began with a survey of 1,000 *Hobbit* 'pre-viewers' in the weeks prior to the release of the first film, An Unexpected Journey, in November 2012. Using factor analysis, five distinct subjective orientations were identified, along with significant relationships between these and various socio-demographic variables, different fandoms, and engagement with prefigurative materials. A larger scale online survey in seven languages was then conducted following the first film's release, which attracted over 2,800 responses. This was followed by an English language survey in the wake of *The Desolation of Smaug*'s release, with over 1,000 responses. Once these researchers conduct their final survey of audience responses to *The Battle of Five Armies* in early 2015, they will have compiled a rich and unique longitudinal data set with perhaps 5,000 respondents overall. As with the World Hobbit Project these researchers will make their dataset available to other researchers, in this case through Waikato University's Hobbit Project website once the project is complete. The final *Hobbit* audience survey will be accessible using this weblink once the survey goes live in mid-January: http://tinyurl.com/kchjtbe. (For any further information about this project, please contact Carolyn Michelle (caro@waikato.ac.nz).

Every reader of *Participations* can help realise this unique opportunity. If you are seeing the film, complete the surveys. Whether you are or you aren't, you can pass on the links to family, friends, colleagues, students, whoever – by email, blog-mention, Facebook, Twitter, or however else you comment and share online. Thank you, from the organisers of both projects.

Meanwhile, there is a great deal to read and consider in this edition of the Journal. Aside from the Themed Section, which offers seven essays using a range of approaches and datasets to address the idea of 'media generations', and which has its own Introduction, this edition of *Participations* presents a further five individual essays.

Adrienne Evans and Mafalda Stasi explore the shifting methodologies being deployed in the fast-growing field of fan studies. They challenge fan researchers to engage in a debate between those using the more traditional methodologies, those focused on the notion of the 'aca-fan', and those who are exploring the recent phenomenon of political activities within and out of fandom.

Ödül Gürsimsek and Kirsten Drotner, also working within the broad field of transmedia fan studies, take the example of *Lost* fandom to raise doubt about claims to any 'emancipatory' potential in spheres of this kind. Using empirical evidence from spoiler and foiler communities, they argue for a nuanced account of the role of such communities, seeing them as engaged in legitimation contests over what will count as acceptable behaviour.

Barbara Mitra, Mike Webb and Claire Wolfe contribute to the ongoing debates about role of sexual attractiveness in the selection of news presenters, both male and female. Drawing on their own survey and focus group evidence, they reveal complexities within both male and female audience members. Women's appearance undoubtedly does play a large role in audience acceptance than men's – but both male and female respondents emphasised that professional presentation of the news itself outranked other issues.

In an entirely different vein, Pavel Skopal reports on his archival research into the reception within Czechoslovakia of a series of documentary films in the 1950s. These documentaries – travelogues from Africa and South America – were hugely popular. Drawing on a substantial archive of fan letters from the time, he argues that the films offered a vital form of surrogate enjoyment within the country's oppressive regime at this time.

Finally, Kenneth Weir and Stephen Dunne deploy methods of discourse analysis to explore the controversies over *A Serbian Film* and *Human Centipede II* – two films denied releases by the British Board of Film Classification. Analysing more than 1,300 published reviews of the films, they reveal the range of kinds of complex moral readings made by audiences.

With four book reviews as well, this is another rich issue once more indicating the extensive and important range of kinds of work being achieved in audience and reception studies.

Martin Barker
General Editor.