

Editorial Introduction: The Future (Past?) of Media Audience Research

Sue Turnbull

There's been a lot of speculation of late about the future of media audience research. And, as the only academic journal devoted to this volatile field, *Participations* has always been at the cutting edge of such debates. However, as one of those concerned with the changing dynamics of what Nick Couldry (2014: 220) has characterised as the 'media manifold', I must admit that I am clinging like a limpet to some of the more valuable insights of the past. This is to some extent motivated by a fundamental belief that while the media may be evolving, human beings are not. Much. In other words, the kinds of things people turn to the media for today (information, entertainment, education, and sex ... etc.) are exactly what they were looking for in the past. Indeed I have long had this urge to rewrite Maslow's hierarchy of human needs as a hierarchy of media consumption. Except everyone's media hierarchy might be just a bit different. Such is the challenge of audience research that while always looking for patterns, is also constantly on the alert for the particular and the odd.

Part of my rear-view mirrorism has to do with the historical bias of an Australian Research Council Linkage project that I am involved in with my colleague at the University of Wollongong, Dr Sukhmani Khorana, and lead by Professor Kate Darian Smith at the University of Melbourne.¹ In this project we are concerned with the role of the media in migration, in particular the role of television in the second half of the twentieth century as it was experienced by the many waves of immigrants to Australia. We are interested not only in how television might have contributed to the migrant experience, but also how it might have reflected this on screen. Our 'industry' partners in this endeavour are the Museum of Victoria and the Australian Centre for the Moving Image who are, of course, looking for the kinds of outcomes that can be of benefit and interest to their own institutions in terms of exhibitions and public programmes.

It was in the process of thinking through our methodological approach to this project that I found myself revisiting, not for the first time, that remarkable book written by Garth Jowett, Ian Jarvie and Kathryn Fuller entitled *Children and the Movies* which details the conduct what came to be known as The Payne Fund Studies (Jowett et al, 1996). As Jowett et al explain, one of the significant points of origin for these studies, that were eventually

published between 1933 and 1935 under the series title 'Motion Pictures and Youth', lay in the work of a charitable organisation (the National Committee for the Study of Juvenile Reading). This organisation had as one of its goals the production of reading materials to promote citizenship. By 1927, however, their interests had expanded to encompass the effects of the burgeoning movie industry on youth. Like many such projects to follow, The Payne Fund Studies therefore represented an attempt by a conservative and religious right to contain the power of the media by arguing for censorship in the interests of protecting the young (Jowett et al, 1996: 34).

Led by a former pastor, William Harrison Short, the National Committee for the Study of Social Values in Motion Pictures, was established in New York in 1927. Short then set about recruiting qualified social scientists, educationalists and psychologists from universities across the country whom he encouraged to find new and innovative ways of investigating the effects of the movies on youth. By the end 1928, 14 different studies were planned encompassing a range of research methods, including 'scientific' laboratory-type tests involving a 'psychogalvanograph' (a machine designed to pick up changes in a subject's heart rate when exposed to images on a screen), a type of affective measure that appears to have come back into fashion. Also proposed was a study by Herbert Blumer in which the movie going autobiographies of middle class college students would be compared with an existing collection of one thousand life histories collected from juvenile delinquents (Jowett et al, 1996: 89). As was evident in the proposed projects, while the psychologists involved in the study favoured more 'scientific' approaches to developing data that could be quantified, measure and analysed, the sociologists clearly favoured a more behavioral approach.

One of those sociologists brought in rather later to the project, was the University of Chicago-trained Paul Cressey. As a masters student Cressey had conducted a controversial study of the then prevalent taxi-dance halls in Chicago. These were venues where men would pay ten cents to a young woman for a dance that might subsequently involve a 'sexual encounter'. Informed by a multi-method approach, involving interviews with the dancers, the patrons and the owners, as well as an account of the function of these halls in an unsettled urban environment, this remarkable study *The Taxi-Dance Hall* initially published in 1932 and reprinted as recently as 2008, is still considered a landmark in the field (Jowett et al, 1996: 84).

Recruited by another Chicago sociologist, Frederic Thrasher, who also had an interest in juvenile delinquency, Cressey and Thrasher set about addressing the Reverend Short's brief of finding a causal link between the movies and problematic social behaviour. Their joint research project, *Boys, Movies and City Streets* was proposed as part of the Payne Fund Studies - but for a variety of reasons, was never completed. Thrasher withdrew from the project, and Cressey himself encountered a series of personal problems that effectively derailed his research. As it is, we have to thank Jowett and his co-authors for reproducing what is believed to be the only known draft of the proposed study written by Cressey.

Cressey's methodological approach to the topic of *Boys and the Movies* was

informed by an earlier study undertaken by himself and Thrasher on the role and function of the Boys Clubs in the East Harlem district of Manhattan, an area they rechristened Intervale – a name pointing to the area’s ‘interstitial’ nature. According to Thresher, the term interstitial was used because it pertains to:

.. spaces that intervene between one thing and another. In nature foreign matter tends to collect and cake in every crack, crevice and cranny – interstices. There are also fissures and breaks in the structure of social organization’ (Jowett et al, 1996: 158)

As far as Cressey was concerned in endeavouring to account for the role of the cinema in the boys’ lives, what was needed was an understanding of their ‘total situation’ (Jowett et al, 1996, 126). Cressey had apparently read Margaret Mead and understood the importance of an anthropological approach to the process of cultural transmission.

The unpublished draft of Cressey’s study therefore begins with a remarkably vivid and compelling account of the street life in this quarter of Manhattan:

The street, the sidewalks swarm with people. Pushcarts range along the curb; the proprietors hawking their wares to all passersby. [...] The shrill notes of a hurdy-gurdy are heard down the street and from somewhere overhead in the solid block of dingy six floor tenements comes the strident noise of a radio out of control. (Jowett et al, 1996: 133)

In this community, where only four per cent of the population is ‘native-born of native-born parents’, twenty or more nationalities are lodged side by side. Even more significant are Cressey’s comments on the problem of the delinquency that has arisen a result of what he characterises as a ‘conflict of cultures’. This, Cressey argues, is a function of the contradictory customs that arise within families as ‘Old World parents and their New World children’ collide. Thus while parents, reared in the ‘Old World’ might have their own conception of the rights, duties and filial obligations, their offspring who consider themselves to be ‘Americans’, may look with disdain upon their old fashioned parents with their queer ‘foreign’ ideas (Jowett et al, 1996: 136). One effect of this cultural conflict is that while the parents stick to their own language groups, the boys on the streets are likely to form their own tribes or gangs. In other words ‘children find in the social world of the streets an emancipation from the narrower nationalistic standards of their parents’ (Jowett et al, 1996: 137). Note that Cressey has yet to ‘blame’ the movies for any of these social tensions.

Indeed, it is only when this rich and detailed backdrop has been established that Cressey introduces his account of the role of the fifteen movie theatres to be found in the community of Intervale. Not surprisingly (although those looking to censor the movies would have been disappointed), he notes that only part of their function is related to the

films that they show. Their other functions are primarily social with hard-pressed parents using them as a form of childcare, or for saving on family heating bills. The theatres may also be used as sites for clandestine sexual activity (a fact that is still true today as my students who have worked as usherettes inform me), or for a variety of nefarious activities involving the many gangs operating in the area who may use it to establish an alibi or to organise a 'hit'. When we do get to the content of the films, the most popular movies are those that are about gangland activities and sex. As Cressey points out, this reflects the fact that the 'youth' concerned are negotiating their social spaces by forming gangs, and that in this community sexual activity begins at puberty

On a more positive note, Cressey notes that for those who come from somewhere else, the movies are also a source of information about 'America'. This would include cowboy pictures, as well as how people live in other places and a whole range of stereotypes from the rural 'hayseed' to the 'college professor'. In other words:

To boys who for the most part do not have an opportunity to become acquainted with that which is traditional American in our culture, the movies along with the tabloid newspapers seem often to be the chief means for getting acquainted with that which they consider 'American' or at least that which is felt to have prestige value. (Jowett et al, 1996: 185)

It is in this context that Cressey proposes that the cinema might constitute 'an incidental educational force', with young people seeking and finding knowledge that *might be useful to them* about fashion, mannerisms, etiquette, potential occupations and the solution to personal problems (233). The key phrase here is 'might be useful to them' given that Cressey's main hypothesis, repeated over and over again in his detailed chapter outline for the final book reporting on the study, is that a boy's response to a 'photoplay' would inevitably be shaped by his social background, his emotional dynamics and his 'axiological' world (Jowett et al 1996 p. 225).

This was the 'epiphany' that changed Cressey's approach to the project as a whole. As he wrote to his employers:

I have been forced by the weight of evidence to see the motion picture not primarily in the relationship [to delinquency and misconduct], but in its varied functions in the lives of different groups and individuals within this community. (Jowett et al, 1996: 87)

And here is the challenge to all of us engaged in the practice of media audience research. How can we account for the role of the media in people's lives, without understanding how those lives are lived, in specific times and in specific places? More importantly, how can we bring to life a moment in time in all its layered complexity in order to reveal the axiological world of the media audience? Having begun with a provocation from Nick Couldry, I will

end with another which reveals that despite over eighty years of media audience research, the future still has much to learn from the past.

As Couldry (2014: 226) argues, to move ahead in media audience research, we need 'renewed scrutiny of the ground, as well as 'close attention to the agency and reflexivity of the people we call *audience members*'. This entails 'an open-minded, practice based approach to whatever it is that people are doing with, or around media' because this is the approach that 'is likely to serve us best in these uncertain times for audience research' (Couldry 2014: 226).

I think Paul Cressey would have agreed.

References:

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Note:

¹ 2015–18 ARC Linkage: *Migration, Cultural Diversity and Television: Reflecting Modern Australia*, Prof Kate Darian-Smith, Prof Sue Turnbull, Dr Sukhmani Khorana, ARC Linkage Partners: Australian Centre for the Moving Image, and Museum Victoria, LP150100202 (\$222,000)