
This book by Andy Ruddock contains not merely another overview of Audience Studies, but gives an extensive meta-analysis of the long running debate on the study of media power. Ruddock tries to break down barriers between different paradigms by comparing audience research from early positivist mass communication models to post-positivist, critical and postmodern cultural studies approaches in their historical and epistemological context. Ruddock shows, for instance, that media effects studies are not only engaged in a search for causal laws, using experimental and quantitative methods, and cultural studies are not limited to ethnographic accounts of subjective experiences in everyday life. Furthermore both paradigms encounter similar difficulties in finding empirical evidence for their theories on media power.

At the end of the book Ruddock concludes that the history of audience research tells us that the relationship between the media and viewers, readers and listeners is complex and requires multiple methods of analysis. The road to this conclusion, which is not new or surprising, is not always easy to follow. Ruddock starts his argument by introducing the main question he intends to answer: what is it that cultural studies promises to tell us about the societies in which we live, and how does this knowledge differ in form and content from other ‘truths’ offered by other (social) sciences? Ruddock does not want to find the right way of looking at the audience to champion one approach over the other. His meta-analysis is an effort to think about how different methods produce different, but often complementary, forms of knowledge.

Chapter 1 deals with the relation between theory and methods. As the nature of reality is so complex that we never manage to know it completely, researchers should be open to a variety of ways analyzing reality because multiple methods give us a more complex, although never complete, view. Ruddock favors post-positivism over positivism, the latter being guided by crude realism where the world is seen as a physical structure created by physical laws of cause and effect. This does not represent the difference between critical cultural studies and the so-called media effects studies. Both approaches are Kuhnian versions of rival paradigms, endowed with strength but also plagued by weaknesses. This is at least one reason to consider how so-called non-critical research traditions have informed our understanding of audiences.
Chapter 2 and 3 review two camps in these early audience studies: media effects research and public opinion research. Chapter 2 focuses on the early period of mass-communication research, dominated by quantitative effects research. Ruddock refuses to see effect researchers as mad scientists producing statistical lies as is often encountered in cultural studies. Although effect studies tend to emphasize the (negative) impact on behavior, using quantitative methods, few researchers, however, thought of media effects in ‘hypodermic’ terms.

Chapter 3 reviews the history of public-opinion research, a major part of mainstream sociological audience research. Here thought and feelings, instead of behavior, were considered to be transformed by media. Ruddock concludes that public opinion research demonstrates a number of important developments in understanding audiences. Not only did they start to look for less obvious signifiers of media effects, gradually researchers realized that society could not be neatly divided into interdependent and dependent variables since the relationship between political institutions, the media and public was interactive. Moreover, the effects of these interactions often emerged over a longer period of time, in the form of deep-seated political orientations.

Chapter 4 describes another shift from the direct media effects model, by looking at (still quantitative) cultivation analysis. Cultivation analysis demonstrates that quantitative research can (also) be used for post-positive and critical purposes. At the same time due to these quantitative methods, cultivation analysis cannot provide an all-encompassing theory of media power. While evidence for cultivation is powerful, the explanations of how this process occurs are not.

Chapter 5 outlines the general aims and assumptions of critical qualitative research, centering on the notion of ideology and the emergence of the encoding/decoding model. This cultural approach to media audiences concentrates on the creation and reception of textual meaning. This shift away from early mass communication effects theory is connected with the broader development of interpretive analysis of human thought and behavior in the social sciences. Ruddock describes the historical development of cultural studies.

Finally Chapter 6 introduces the concept of consumption as a topic through which we can explore the expansion of audiencehood into the realm of everyday life. Consumption is defined as the meaningful appropriation of goods and services. Ruddock sees this development in media audience research as a postmodern reaction to limitations of encoding/decoding/resistive reading research. One of these limitations is that cultural studies made the mistake of taking on unresearchable questions (just like effects researchers did). Following Michel Foucault, Ruddock discusses new directions for audience research such as feminist research.
and studies of fan culture and the domestic appropriation of media technologies.

At the end Ruddock concludes that it has become easier to write about what we cannot say about audiences than what we can say. Regardless of paradigmatic orientation, contemporary scholarship agrees that relations between media and audiences are so complex that they require multiple methods. Cultural power is something that has to be described and explained. Quantitative research is important as a means of mapping the denotative aspects of power. Qualitative methods are useful as a ways of analyzing how consensus is created, maintained and diverted. Audience researchers must acknowledge the strengths and weakness of a variety of approaches to their subject.

Again, not every argument made by Ruddock may make sense to the reader, but all in all Understanding Audiences offers a broad overview of the historical and epistemological development of audience research. Each chapter ends with a number of exercises, which invite readers to discuss and apply Ruddock’s points of view to different research problems. This makes the textbook useful for researchers and students of media, communication and cultural studies.

Department of Communication
University of Nijmegen

Paul Nelissen


A glaring pink cover: not exactly the sexiest color for a book on television, but somehow there must be a reason... The referential value – “Did you happen to see the latest Sage publication on television in Europe? The one with the pink cover, remember?” – probably tipped the balance in deciding on the cover design.

Television across Europe is an edited collection of articles addressing contemporary developments in television from a perspective grounded in Western Europe. The “TV box”, as depicted on the cover, is studied from both an institutional (Part I) and a symbolic point of view (Parts II and III). The book’s chapters are written by, generally speaking, reputed scholars based at European universities, except for Albert Moran, whose affiliation is with Griffith University, Brisbane, Australia. The majority of contributors are members of the Euro-Media Research Group.

The book is undoubtedly a very useful tool for education at the undergraduate level in disciplines such as communication or European studies.