
Most histories of mass media since the rise of print have touched upon the nature of the audiences who have consumed those media. For the most part, however, this concern has not been central. With the rise of effects research under the leadership of Paul Lazarsfeld et al. during the 1930s, a form of audience research gained prominence, but it was primarily limited to assessing the influence that given radio programs, films, or publications had on individuals. Although effects research did endeavour to consider a broad social context—class and education, for example—little was said about the dynamics of media consumption in terms of the home, family, and peer groups.

The past two decades have yielded numerous attempts to redress this omission, with cultural studies providing the inspiration. Case studies have come primarily from television and, to a lesser extent, motion pictures. On one hand, this research has offered us an ethnographic look at viewership; on the other, it has shown little interest in audience history. It has seemed as if there remained an intellectual niche waiting to be filled: a history, informed by sociological and anthropological insights, of the composition and activities of audiences which would also assess previous audience theory as part of its mandate. Richard Butsch's The Making of American Audiences has admirably filled that niche, at least in an American context.

The time frame of The Making of American Audiences ranges from mid-eighteenth century colonial America to the outset of the last decade of the twentieth century. The emphasis is on “entertainment audiences.” Readership is therefore not considered; viewership and listenership is. The entertainment provinces the book considers include theatre, minstrelsy, the concert saloon, vaudeville, movies, radio, and television.

Butsch’s coverage of early American theatrical audiences is especially intriguing given recent debates regarding the degree to which media audiences have been considered active or passive. The colonial United States inherited a European tradition that regarded being an audience member as a right rather than a privilege. This carry-over from street and carnival traditions implied that such a right included the prerogative to be rowdy. Elites saw such behaviour—largely but not wholly working class in origin—as a possible overture to more general social unrest. In the guise of protecting (at first) women and then children, they sought, with varying degrees of success, to control it.

The book documents in compelling detail the demographics of such audiences, along with class differences in theatrical preference that culminated in the Astor Place riot of 1849. Here the militia fired on an unruly mob of primarily young unmarried working-class men—or “b’hoys” as they were known—protesting the performance of a British actor. Twenty-two were killed. As a result, the rights of an audience to enact its own brand of participatory theatre became limited by the courts.
This taming of audiences, which Butsch refers to as a “de-masculinization,” made theatre-going more efficacious for women—previously many of the women who attended were prostitutes. The burgeoning of the female audience began with special matinées, but soon spread to evening performances where middle-class women used the opportunity to display the latest fashions. Plays became more melodramatic in response. As a result, disgruntled men sought alternative entertainment—perhaps in part to recapture the spirit of the b’hoys. Minstrel shows, in which performers did racial parodies in blackface, became one alternative.

Did this phenomenon somehow represent working-class cultural resistance to the Americanized variant of Victorian high culture? To a degree, according to the author, who also shows how it was linked to a disdain for reforms favouring temperance, women’s rights, and racial equality. He also challenges earlier assumptions that minstrel-show audiences were exclusively male; perhaps this was so in major cities, but in rural areas entire families were likely to attend.

Minstrel shows soon had a raucous rival in concert saloons. The mostly male attendees caught musical acts that featured dancing girls, with the patrons often served by provocative barmaids. Butsch does not mention, and it might be worth noting, that the heyday of this form of entertainment—from the end of the Civil War to the 1880s—coincided with the so-called Golden Age of the American West. Hence, although it was a pan-national phenomenon, the concert saloon has frequently been depicted in the Hollywood western—Destry Rides Again (1939), featuring Marlene Dietrich, is a classic example.

The concert saloon was a forerunner of cabaret, which the book mentions but does not consider, and vaudeville, which is extensively examined. Vaudeville continued an earlier carnivalesque tradition of interaction between performer and audience (especially with shows staged in smaller venues). It was largely a middle-class form of entertainment usually frequented by American-born patrons. The major live-entertainment alternative to vaudeville during the early twentieth century was theatre. As the author shows, it was quite diverse. Partly elitist to be sure, it also yielded ethnic variants, and Italian and Yiddish examples are considered.

The bulk of immigrant and working-class audiences during the first decades of the twentieth century were not, however, patrons of vaudeville or theatre. They were drawn to the new spectacle of cinema in its raw form—silent films in that often makeshift venue known as the nickelodeon. The Making of American Audiences extensively charts the demographics of this phenomenon in both its urban and rural manifestations. Butsch shows how middle-class reformers became concerned with the moral laxity of movies, not just because of what was depicted on-screen, but also in response to the rowdy and occasionally licentious behaviour that could occur among the patrons. The call for reform echoed what happened with theatre in the previous century: women became a first concern, then children.

During the 1920s, worry about audience behaviour in movie venues lessened. Motion pictures moved from low-brow to middle-brow with the creation of
upscale theatres. Decorum improved with decor as a middle-class appropriation of the medium took place. With the coming of sound at the end of the decade, what little talking remained among audience members virtually disappeared—during the nickelodeon era, lively comments and the reading aloud of intertitles had been a staple. Audiences at every level were hooked on the new talking pictures, despite the superior aesthetic quality of late silent cinema. Butsch also notes that although audiences preferred silent to talking pictures, they preferred live music accompanying films to music on the soundtrack. This option, of course, could not continue, and the advent of the sound film resulted in layoff notices for a whole generation of musicians.

The book chronicles patterns of movie-going during the Depression, but has little to say about the subject thereafter. Comprehensive in so many respects, one wishes that The Making of American Audiences had considered the nature of movie audiences in subsequent decades before focusing on radio and television. Much remains to be said about the shifting composition and segmentation of post-1950 movie audiences, especially in response to the collapse of the traditional studios, the role of independents, and the emergence of industry-wide control by multinational conglomerates.

The coverage of radio dwells largely on its Golden Age during the 1930s and 1940s. Nevertheless, there is a perceptive analysis of the years just prior, when the listening audience consisted primarily of hobbyists. The use of the medium during the Depression is considered in terms of the listenership that was attracted to various program genres, from soaps, through sports, to music. Especially interesting is the appraisal of rural radio and African-American responses to the medium. Another facet of broadcast radio during the 1930s was the emergence of discourses devoted to assessing it. The author considers both commercial (audience polling) and academic (effects research) traditions.

Once again, as with the book’s coverage of cinema, there is an audience history subsequent to the point where the author leaves off. Radio did not disappear with the rise of television. It adopted different formats to cater to an increasingly segmented audience. This is not so much a criticism of the book as it is speculative curiosity regarding how the author might assess radio’s post-Golden Age audiences—one assumes with the same acuity evident in his consideration of the earlier period.

In tackling television, Butsch rightly emphasizes an important point, one often neglected in previous writings about the medium: patterns of family viewing, program genres, and methods for studying the influence of television all derive from what took place when radio was the only broadcast kid on the block. Well documented in The Making of American Audiences is the transition from traditional patterns of radio listening (and movie attendance) to being captured by what Butsch calls the “electronic Cyclops.” Once again, commentators of the day applied effects research to a medium, this time augmented by the uses and gratifications approach. The strengths and limitations of both are assessed. The book follows up its coverage of the tube with a brief look at the influence on its audi-
ences exerted by the remote control and the video revolution—the latter spawning movie rentals, along with the tapping of programs and zapping of commercials.

In light of the book’s consideration of the VCR, it might be worth adding that this medium represents a noteworthy trend in audience practice that dates back to the invention of the phonograph and is manifest in all subsequent sound and video recording: the consumption of entertainment in personal or private time as opposed to public time. The audience is thereby de-centred temporally as well as spatially. The trend has escalated over the past quarter-century. Examples include movie rental outlets being open 24 hours (not the case initially); time-shifting with a VCR so programs can be watched at the convenience of the viewer rather than on a network schedule; multiple entertainment services available by telephone round-the-clock; television networks such as CNN that provide news packages every 30 minutes, thereby allowing viewers to by-pass their former dependency on traditional newscast hours; and the escalation of Internet possibilities.

The Making of American Audiences concludes with a look at recent attempts, especially those inspired by cultural studies, to assess the degree to which audiences actively appropriate, or are ultimately co-opted by, the media they consume. Butsch argues convincingly that the dichotomy is never clear-cut. An audience might be active at one level, in imparting a distinct reading to a television program, for example, but passive at another in succumbing to dominant ideological tenets embedded in that program’s narrative. The book supports this contention with a discussion of precedents that go back 250 years. Meticulously researched and lucidly presented, The Making of American Audiences is, to date, the definitive history of its subject matter.

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