



Media Studies 2.0? Binge Drinking and Why Audiences Still Matter

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Abstract

The idea of ‘audience’ no longer appears to suit media studies. Conceiving the public as sponges for information and entertainment may have worked in the television age. But not so the computer, mobile phone, iPod era. Increasingly, it appears that the public amuse and inform themselves, using media to create and circulate their own content. This presents media scholars with a considerable challenge, as outlined in David Gauntlett’s announcement of ‘Media Studies 2.0’. One goal of the new discipline is to dispense with ‘audience’ as a meaningful category. This essay will argue that this is a rhetorical shift only possible because of audience research. Additionally, in describing a study of young student drinkers, the essay will argue that traditional, ‘receiver’ definitions of audience offer an important means for the public to enter policy debates on binge culture. Abandoning audience thus also means ignoring media issues that the public feel are important.

Introduction

For more than a quarter of a century, media studies has been involved in a struggle to redirect public debates on ‘media effects’. To date, ‘audience’ has been a vital element of the project. In the 1970s, scholars such as Stuart Hall and David Morley looked to define media influence in terms of power rather than behaviour; television in particular (as befitted that moment) was primarily ‘effective’ in cultivating general political sentiments rather than discrete actions (being violent, voting or shopping). Using the concept of hegemony (Hall 1986), the question was not what media made people do; it was how the public were convinced to do *nothing* about inequitable social conditions. Media were most ‘effective’ in winning popular consent for laissez-faire social and economic policies from the very people who such measures would punish most (see, for example, Hall’s analysis of Thatcherism in *The Hard Road to Renewal* (1989)). To illustrate the shift implied, where it might appear sensible to ask how an advertising campaign influences sales of a certain product, the critical approach advocated by Hall and Morley would ask how the total media

environment encourages consumption as a lifestyle, and the conviction that buying, identity and satisfaction are as one.

'Audience' was an important brake ensuring that this critique was not applied in mechanical ways. 'Reception', 'interpretation', 'opposition' and 'resistance' emerged as key terms. Morley, together with important figures such as Ang (1985), Fiske (1993) and Radway (1983), studied how audiences' understandings and uses of the 'formulaic' output of the cultural industries often had little or nothing to do with dominant ideological structures or corporate goals. This conclusion grew from time spent listening to audiences explain their media tastes in their own terms, preferably on their 'home turf', relatively unshackled of predetermined methodologies. The intention was to democratise media debates by treating people as cultural actors rather than dopes.

However, the fact that 'hegemony' rarely registers in public discussions on media suggests that something is amiss. This has led to a call to abandon not only 'effect' but also 'audience' as meaningful abstractions. We live in the YouTube, MySpace era. Thanks to iPod, people can not only choreograph the soundtrack to their lives, they can also carry it with them. Under such conditions, defining the public as receivers of texts seems frightfully dated. For David Gauntlett (2007), Hall and colleague asked some interesting questions, but their efforts to establish a discipline that connected with public experience, a 'Media Studies 1.0', if you will, ran aground, thanks in part to 'audience'. Heralding 'Version 2.0', Gauntlett has argued that 'audience' is a redundant academic device that protects unhelpfully elitist distinctions between 'expert' media producers, 'proper' scholarly commentators and amateur publics that feed from the crumbs left by the mass communication process. This essay will argue that Gauntlett's is an ironic polemic: it is only possible *because* of 'audience', which sustains as a means of engaging with publics and policies. Using a case study looking at alcohol advertising, as it is understood by UK student drinkers, I will argue that 'old-fashioned' ideas about reception and influence are things that people, not scholars, find useful under some circumstances connected with the issue of cultural rights.

There is certainly much to value in Gauntlett's position. And one must acknowledge that, much like noted fan scholar Jenkins testimony before the US Congress in the wake of the Columbine shootings (1999), 'Media Studies 2.0' is more strategy than creed. Nevertheless, the clarity of its manifesto pays the inevitable price of evading nuances within what passed for 'Media Studies 1.0'. Understanding this, I will argue that there are five things to bear in mind when considering the 2.0 positions, and its tongue-in-cheek call to dissolve 'audience'.

First, the fact that 2.0 is authored by an audience researcher signals a deeper history. Scholars have always been aware that 'audiences' – who they are, what they do and where they fit into cultural production – is a fluid term. Butsch (2003) and Livingstone (2004) explicitly highlight this fact.

Second, the audience question has always been about participation, not reception in and of itself. This is the central theme in Morley and Brunson's critical review of their *Nationwide* project (1999), often identified as the kernel of a failed campaign to establish ideology as the modus operandi of media studies. Reviewing key works within 'plan ideology', however, we find researchers who *were* interested in linking 'audience' with 'production', both by encouraging the analysis of not just text but industry, and participation in the generation of knowledge about mediated power.

Third, the welcome focus on creativity in 2.0 risks amplifying a trend, identified by Bird (2003), where empirical visions of 'cultural participants' skew in the direction of those who have the most to say about their media tastes and practices. Other sorts of responses (the casual, the uncommitted, the inarticulate) are just as if not more important.

Fourth, Media Studies 2.0 identifies students as a special kind of audience for both media and media theory. Version 1 is accused of brainwashing its protégés, rather than allowing them to develop their own critiques on the basis of the knowledge that they bring to the discipline. Perhaps it is unsurprising, then, that in a project on student drinking, I found young people who scoffed at the notion that their drinking had anything to do with alcohol advertising. However, conceiving themselves as the recipients of seductive alcohol messages did allow students to express frustration at the way that drinking had colonised so many aspects of the 'fun' they were supposed to be having. In other words, a traditional notion of audience offered a means of contributing a considered view on the rhetoric around binge culture.

The overall and fifth point is this. 'Audience' still matters to audiences. The suspicion directed at the term comes from the idea, recently outlined by Bratich (2005), that academic efforts to define and categorise experiences of media do not 'find' but create. In this regard, the portrait of audiences as victims of powerful, industrially produced media messages began as an artefact of experimental research design and quantitative data analysis, not anything that naturally belonged in public experience. This problem was never entirely corrected in Media Studies 1.0. True, its scholars committed to researching media use *in situ*. However, in framing activity as reception, or interpretation of media messages, 'audience' was confined to the same 'reactive' mode that invalidated laboratory projects. The 'effect' was to curtail the sorts of public media practices that scholars studied, and what they said about them. Undemocratic consequences followed: One can hardly expect people to participate in cultural politics when their role is confined to choosing between pre-formulated positions, rather than making their own.

However, my own research on young people and alcohol marketing and advertising paints 'reactive' models as far from passé. For the young people I worked with, conceiving themselves as targets for powerful

commercial rhetoric provided a useful starting point for a discussion of their social rights. The project in question was commissioned by CitySafe, a local authority partnership responsible for public health and safety in Liverpool, UK (Ruddock 2007). The organisation wanted to design an effective alcohol awareness campaign-aimed students. Yet, the design team knew that this would only be possible if they understood the pleasures and dangers of student drinking through the eyes of student drinkers. A variety of methods were used to discover how the group both thought and communicated about alcohol. Within this question, alcohol advertising was positioned as a resource rather than a danger; as something that could be used to spark discussions on why the students drank in the way that they did. Their answers indicated that 'traditional', reactive understandings of 'audience' both resonated with their habits, and provided a useful foundation for intruding into the question of how we should talk about alcohol.

What is Media Studies 2.0?

Media Studies 2.0 is a Web-based position-come-debate emerging from Gauntlett's www.theory.org site and Merrin's blog (2007a; www.mediastudies2point0.blogspot.com) and forum (2007b; www.twopointzeroforum.blogspot.com). Merrin wonders if media studies can be taught to students who generally possess extensive expertise in both 'interpreting' and 'using'. Sympathetically, Gauntlett argues that the discipline can only sustain its relevance by abandoning a number of damaging but implicit assumptions. Many of these are audience related. Succinctly, media studies should be about widening access to cultural production and participation. In this project, 'audience', *as it has been defined*, may be more hindrance than help.

According to Gauntlett, Merrin's dilemma happens because he finds himself at the dog-end of a ill-fated intellectual project aspiring to free the masses from the yoke of media domination. Although well intentioned, the elitism of 'Media Studies 1.0' ensured that it could never deliver (partly since people don't want to be 'freed' from things that they like). 'Version 1' divided the media universe into have and have not worlds, banishing 'audience' to the subordinate place. It identified an 'enemy'; a capitalist-centred system of media production, out of public bounds. It believed that scholars, armed with sophisticated theoretical tools, could decode the politicised messages circulating under the guise of entertainment. Much like Toto in *The Wizard of Oz*, the mission was to draw back the curtain to see the real figures and apparatus lying behind media apparitions upon which the public gazed with awe.

'Audience' emerged as a keystone in this project. As Hall (1982) argued, the media 'problem' referred to the narrow range of people and ideas that are presented for public consideration. The North American

mass communication research, which tried to quantify media effects under experimental conditions, offered no solution. One could hardly empower people, Hall argued, with techniques that reduced them to bundles of psychological impulses that were directed by external stimuli. The solution lay in looking at media experiences through the eyes of the people who were having them. Although a laudable aim, Gauntlett feels that this project could never mature since it originated in an elitism that treated the public with equal contempt. Version 1.0, in effect, identified two sorts of audience; viewers, readers and listeners, understood and studied as receivers and interpreters of texts, and a student vanguard who, by being exposed to the right theories and methods, could be trained to 'read' media properly.

Hence, Merrin's dilemma: what do you do when the 'audience' you know best, students, are more familiar with the terrain than their supposed guide? The wider implications are obvious; perhaps one of the reasons why the discipline struggles to define its public relevance is because in treating the non-academic world as 'audiences', receivers rather than creators of wisdom, media studies foists self-evident or irrelevant 'truths' onto a public that has no use for or interest in the knowledge on offer.

To correct, Gauntlett suggests that 'conventional concerns with power and politics (be) reworked ... (so) that the notion of super-powerful media industries invading the minds of a relatively passive population is compelled to recognise and address the context of more widespread creation and participation'. Additionally, 'conventional research methods are replaced – or at least supplemented – by new methods which recognise and make use of people's own creativity, and brush aside the outmoded notions of "receiver" audiences and elite "producers"' (www.theory.org.uk/mediastudies2.htm).

Part of the problem in Version 1, then, was its failure to recognise the inadequacy of 'audience' as a category that could meaningfully engage with public concerns, desires and pleasures. Gauntlett gives further indications of by pinpointing two moments that would appear to further the 2.0 agenda by vapourising the very idea.

The title of the journal *Participations* (launched 2003), an 'audience studies' journal that manages to avoid calling them 'audiences' – in its main title at least, although the subtitle 'Journal of Audience and Reception Studies' offers *a perhaps inevitable translation into the language we are trying to get away from.* (italics added)

The forthcoming conference *Transforming Audiences*, which seeks to undermine its own title by questioning the traditional approach to people who 'produce' media and people who 'use' media (www.theory.org.uk/mediastudies2.htm).

Hence, now would seem a very bad time to argue that 'audience' can help media studies make public policy interventions, including 'public' in

'policy'. But the real issue here is how efforts to make sense of media inevitably involve the manufacture of classifications that actively shape the things we see. As Hills points out in his work on fans (2002), we must remember that the realities we explore will always exceed our ability to categorise. Hence, it is important to maintain a healthy scepticism of the concepts we deploy to outline how and why media matter. In this regard, it is no coincidence that coup against 'audience studies' is internal. 'Media Studies 2.0', if there is such a thing, only exists because of a debate on what 'audience' means *within* audience research. This is why the *concept* still matters.

Is this so very different from 1.0?

Gauntlett acknowledges that the 2.0 position owes much to '1.0'. In this spirit, it is only fair to say that his concerns have been raised before by others who have made their name beneath the 'audience' mantle. Writing in 2004, Sonia Livingstone worried that media scholars were unprepared to deal with new environments, since so many of their assumptions conflated 'audience' with a constricted understanding of television viewing.

For the past half century, we have not so much researched 'the television audience' as researched national, often public service, mass broadcast, non-interactive television along with the nationally conceived, consensus oriented, sit back on the couch, family audience in the living room. (p. 76)

Although cautious over how 'new' and 'interactive' media practices had become, Livingstone nevertheless ceded that 'new interactive technologies put interpretative activities at the very centre of media design and use' (p. 78). That is, it could no longer be denied that audience reception increasingly intrudes on production. We see this when soap producers consult 'expert' fans on plot developments that will work (Harrington and Bielby 1995), or when the shelf life of video games are extended by the circulation of 'user' made modifications (Rehak 2003).

But this did not announce the end or failure of the audience project. Taking a historical perspective, Butsch (2003) provides evidence that 'audience' has never been an 'object', but is rather a referent to shifting relations, practices and identities. The television audience had been conceived in the domestic sphere, and much of the debate focussed on the feminised dimensions of this centre. A century earlier, however, 'going to drama theatre in New York City meant entering a masculine realm where one could expect drinking, smoking, prostitution, and rough and boisterous behaviour' (p. 18). The point is not to 'fix' audience as either masculine or feminine, but to outline who the idea embraces and who it rejects. Staying with US 19th-century theatre, when steps were taken to exclude unruly single young men, the fact that they became a 'non-audience' did not mean that their need for entertainment miraculously

disappeared. Whatever its restrictions, audience has always kept an eye on what happens beyond the immediate text/reader/listener/viewer moment.

And this is true even of those studies that sat squarely in the 1.0 tradition. In a critical postscript to *The Nationwide Audience*, Morley (1990) confessed that his efforts to understand the television's social significance through asking people how they interpreted the eponymous 1970s UK news magazine show mistakenly defined audience in reactive terms. Reviewing the entire project, where reception studies had been preceded by textual analysis that tried to fix the preferred meaning of the show, Morley and Brunson (1999) argued that this mistake should not disguise their real interest in cultural participation. However mundane the text, and however ham-fisted the effort to understand its relevance, or not, to viewers, *Nationwide* was one of the places where 'Englishness' came to be; 'it is in what is taken for granted – these seemingly inconsequential matters of "mere continuity" – that we find the most embedded assumptions about the conduct of social life' (p. 11). Studies such as this therefore 'might increase understanding of people's conditions of existence and the production of alternative histories and art practices' (p. 3).

Even Marxist audience researchers who maintained that people are more used by than users of media, were keen to address cultural production. Consider Justin Lewis and Sut Jhally. Reactive audience models are premised on the problematic assumption that the public are sequestered from media making. The title of Lewis and Cruz's (1993) collection on audiences, *Viewers, readers, listeners*, is hardly promising, then. Nor, at face value, is Jhally's essay in this edition (1994), chronicling his attempts to reveal the dangerously sexist aesthetics of MTV music videos to its core youth audience. In *Enlightened Racism* (1992), Jhally and Lewis combined focus group interviews with industrial analysis to critique the racial politics of the hugely popular *Cosby Show*, and the effects this had on how people discussed race issues in America. Their conclusion was this. Bill Cosby's success in placing the tale of an upwardly mobile black family at the heart of US primetime television came at a Faustian price. Despite its clear celebration of African American culture, institutional compromises meant that *Cosby* could never treat racism as anything other than a historical peculiarity. The show did not ignore bigotry. However, the phenomenon was only referenced historically, as something that had happened in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s. This frame, combined with growing images of black affluence on television, encouraged a belief among white viewers that structural racism could be consigned to the past. This allowed them to evade the fact that the fortunes of the average black American family declined in the *Cosby* era.

The idea that a single television show could be instrumental in disguising a substantial chunk of social reality could hardly be a sharper statement of a 'reactive' audience model. At the same time, Lewis and Jhally's work also spoke to a desire to move beyond viewer/reader/text interaction.

Commenting some years later on media literacy (1998), the authors claimed that there was more to media studies than encouraging textual deconstruction. Such actions meant little, and were indeed impossible, in the absence of the ability to also 'read' the industries producing those texts. For Hobbs (1998), this could only happen if audiences became involved in production, and it is in this regard that Jhally's earlier *Dreamworlds* music video project becomes relevant. Rather than write his argument, Jhally's work began by recording and editing videos to show how, when stripped of the intended context and soundtrack, images of scantily clad women appeared more sinister. Significantly, his first 'audience' for this argument were not scholarly peers, but US undergraduates, whose comments he used in developing the project long before his thesis was presented to fellow academics. *Dreamworlds* formed the launch pad for Jhally's Media Education Foundation (MEF), which specialises in the production of educational videos designed to spread the critique of corporate media cultures to a wider, mostly youthful public. Although the organisation's rationale remains to 'unmask' dangerous messages circulated by a profit-driven media culture with little concern for social equality, it isn't true that the MEF regards its audiences as dopes. Academic success depends on a certain sort of audience reaction. Careers rise and fall on peer review. Hence, it is interesting that since founding the MEF, Jhally has largely ignored mainstream academia, preferring to take his argument directly to young people who, in this regard, are treated as experts. True, MEF activities tend to follow concerns with effects, particularly the damage that sex and violence in film, television, advertising and video gaming does to gender relations. But in bypassing traditional academic structures, Jhally's organisation has at least made the audience a participant in the effects dialogue.

Problematisation problems: Bratich, Bird and the limits of creativity

Neither can we ignore that the image of the skilled user at the core of '2.0' is a necessary but contingent intellectual abstraction. It is not a criticism to say that we must heed, as Butsch warns, what section of the public disappears from view in looking for those who create rather than receive. In an approach to audiences that is largely sympathetic to the 2.0 project, Bratich (2005) nevertheless feels that it is possible to retain a notion of power, located here in 'mediation' rather than 'media'. It is here, ultimately, that we can see how traditional audience formulations are *helpful* to *media users* in making sense of their cultural position.

Bratich concurs that reactive definitions misplace audiences in mass communication circuits. By conventional wisdom, mass communication research understood audiences as constituted in media power, as inert vessels waiting to be activated by injunctions to aggress or consume. Yet,

an alternative reading of this period is possible. If early researchers looked at reactions to messages foisted on the public by all powerful and alien media machines, at the same time investigators also saw that media power could only become real when it tapped existing public concerns and energies. As an example, Bratich mentions Cantril's study of the hysteria that followed the broadcast of Orson Welles's 1938 radio production of *War of the Worlds* (1966). One of the most notable features of this study is Cantril's conclusion that the apparently irrational panic that followed a fictional piece on an outlandish invasion from Mars made complete sense in a world on the brink of war. In the shadow of Nazism, the public were ready to explode, and Welles did little more than present the opportunity. This was *not* a 'cathartic' explanation. On the whole, those who 'believed' felt duped and foolish. Nevertheless, the example clarifies why Bratich reads an ambiguity in effects research that positioned the audience as both subordinated to and constituent of mediated power. Thus, even 'passive' accounts were concerned with the 'productive' capacities of 'receivers'. His larger point is that although 'audience' can be a figment of academic imaginations that reduce nebulous multitudes into neatly ordered masses, two facts remain: These scholarly 'problematizations' come to have a materiality of their own, when and if they become the basis for public discourse and policy intervention; and they also serve as a starting point for studying public media practices outside the castle walls.

By logical inference, '2.0' is inevitably an abstraction of its own with key costs and benefits. Bird (2003) predicted these problems in an earlier review of the state of the audience art, based on her own encounters with television viewers and tabloid readers. Her survey concluded with the tale of 'Kathy' and 'Kevin'. Kathy was a fan of the US primetime drama, *Dr Quinn, Medicine Woman*. She watched little television other than her favourite show, had theorised her own fandom in a scholarly and reflexive fashion, and used her fan identity as a foundation for a wider interest in women's history. 'Kevin', on the other hand, was a classic couch potato. Kevin was a child who watched anything and everything all day and every day, but still had little to say about the medium. Kathy clearly fits the 2.0 agenda more comfortably than Kevin. But Kevin still exists. His experience is no less significant. The danger is that he is unlikely to blip on the 2.0 radar.

Bird noted unease around the term audience. The unpredictability of reactions to and uses of texts and technologies make it seem impossible to use such a nebulous label. Yet, the multiplicity of practices that happen in the audience frame really point to the inextricable nature of media/culture/everyday life relations. Therefore, 'audience', as it relates to the fact that everyday life involves managing symbolic encounters, sustains as an important gateway letting media studies in to the discussion of the social. But moreover, in ignoring the 'Kevins' of this world, scholars have also ignored the mileage left in 'passive' notions of 'reception'.

Booze nation: Knowledgeable audiences and persuasion

Turning to UK binge drinking, one can certainly argue that efforts to come to grips with the phenomenon are in many ways hampered by viewing drinkers as people who receive and act on alcohol messages in Pavlovian fashion. Binge drinking connects to wider concerns about youth and antisocial behaviour, articulated with the Labour government's 'Respect' agenda. The notion of banning or controlling alcohol advertising has been floated as a potential strategy within a general commitment to act on the multiple causes of youth disorder. As recently as February 2007, Professor Ian Gilmore, the head of the Royal College of Physicians, called for an outright moratorium on all alcohol promotion to stem an epidemic of drink-related disease (Deaths spark calls for alcohol advertising ban 2007).

The Office of Communication (OFCOM), the body that regulates UK media practices, was charged with assessing the feasibility of implementing such a ban in 2004. The organisation was also asked to produce an informed opinion on whether such a ban would work. This placed the regulator in a quandry. OFCOM is responsible for acting in the public interest, but also has a duty to preserve the commercial viability of the UK media. It could not ban alcohol advertising on exclusively moral grounds, given the revenue implications for television, magazines and the like. In this context, three reports were commissioned by Young (2004), Nash (2004) and Cragg (2004). The researchers disagreed on the role that advertising played in promoting real-world drinking, but Young's conclusion was identified as OFCOM's bottom line position, given its constitutional duty to arbitrate between consumer and industry. Reviewing mostly quantitative, experimental research on advertising and its effects, Young concluded that drinking is driven by 'alcohologenic cultures'. That is, drinking has become so ingrained in British life that the only 'effect' alcohol advertising has is to reinforce the predisposition to drink that already exists:

Advertising and other media representations of alcohol consumption are part of the young person's culture and there are theoretical grounds to assume that advertising alcohol has a minor role to play although in my opinion there is no solid empirical evidence. Also, the 'alcohologenic' cultures cover such a variety of models and ways of representation of drink and drinking that removing one aspect of this – advertising – would not solve the problem ... (Young 2004, 19)

Of course this was an extraordinarily convenient argument for brewers and distillers who claim to promote nothing other than responsible drinking. What was less apparent was that accepting that alcohol advertising is not directly to blame for what and how much people drink does not mean accepting it wields *no* influence, or even that it is only 'effect' comes in the form of swaying brand preference. Nash argued that although

behavioural connections had not been established, the fact that children and teenagers find great pleasure in drinks advertisements featuring animation, animals and music indicate the 'no effects' position is premature. Along the same lines, in interviews with underage drinkers, Cragg found an appreciation for the anti-authority feel common in alcopop commercials. He hypothesised that these sentiments could promote contempt for alcohol age restrictions.

Although they did not couch their suspicions in these terms, Nash and Cragg's ideas are consistent with Bratich's 'channelling' notion of media power. But of more interest to the current analysis, research among a group of student drinkers in the city of Liverpool found people who, when asked for their own experiences of 'alcohologenic cultures', provided examples where their drinking behaviours had, in their own view, been directed by the drinks industry through advertising and marketing.

This research was conducted for CitySafe, a Liverpool-based partnership comprising the City Council, local Primary Care Trusts, and the Merseyside Police and Fire & Rescue Services. Part of the project used focus groups among 59 second-year undergraduates. Students were asked to bring an alcohol advertisement they would like to discuss to the groups, with an eye towards identifying what, in their view, the ad said about the appeal of drinking. This would appear very '1.0' in asking an old question ('what does advertising do') via a questionable method. Focus groups conventionally involve collecting a group of people together to hold semi-structured interviews on a particular topic. Ideally, this allows audiences to exert some control over the direction of a research topic, in contrast to close-ended techniques such as the survey. Focus groups are therefore suited to the exploratory stages of research projects, where scholars generate questions and topics for further research (Wyszomerski 1999). This explains why Morley used the method in the *Nationwide* study, a project conceived as the beginning of a much wider interest in connections between media and national identity (Morley and Brunson 1999).

Recently, however, both academics and the corporate sector have complained that focus group carry little 'real-world' weight (Chong 2006; Gauntlett 2007). It is certainly true that spending an hour talking to strangers in some cold interview room can reveal little about lived experience. However, the question of method is rarely about choosing the best technique, but rather being clear about what kinds of claims the selected device allows the researcher to make. In this respect, a few issues need to be noted. First, viewed as a whole, the CitySafe project was about cultural participation. Although the partnership was interested to know if it was possible to design messages that could persuade young people to moderate their drinking, and were equally curious to know if drinks advertising could have the opposite effect, drinking was seen as a cultural

activity. In this regard, CitySafe were keen to include young people as participants in developing a dialogue on alcohol control in Merseyside. In this context, the ads and groups played an ice-breaking, idea-generating role, rather than a device intended to find a definitive answer to the question 'what works?' Even a cursory glance at the binge drinking debate reveals a dilemma where although it is clear that communication plays a vital role in understanding how we drink, the exact nature of that role, the range of places we find drinking messages, the meaning of those messages, and the connections between meaning and action are far from clear. Under these circumstances, exploratory research is perfectly appropriate. Moreover, having students identify the advertisements they wanted to talk about was intended to reduce the space between the interviews and the actual drinking experience.

The 59 students were divided into groups of 9–10 and asked to describe their advertisement, explain why they had selected it for discussion, talk about their feelings about alcohol and the apparent binge drinking crisis, and explain what they thought were the main forces driving students to drink. Interviews were then transcribed and coded using NVIVO 7, a software package specifically designed for the thematic organisation and analysis of qualitative data. The coding stage looked for three things in the data; points of thematic repetition between respondents, significant factors in drinking cultures identified by the groups themselves, and answers to familiar questions on media effects, such as the power of advertising. In the last area, students identified conditions under which they *wanted* to be treated like audiences.

At first blush, students found the idea that advertising could make them drink preposterous. The things that determined what and how much they consumed were cost and taste. But this was not to say that they saw their drinking as entirely voluntary. Many felt the weight of living within the 'best time of their lives'. Student life carried a burden of expectation; they were supposed to be having wild times, and that wildness was generally associated with drinking. Local bars capitalised on this, targeting students with cheap drinks promotions and theme nights where the 'fun' quotient relied on intoxication. It was here that students began to argue that their habits were indeed industrially encouraged, with advertising playing a role.

This emerged in a discussion on Magners' cider, which ended up reversing the idea that advertising cannot make someone drink something they do not want to drink. Asked to highlight specific commercials, the students agreed with Nash in stating that even if they did not like a particular product, they could appreciate and enjoy a well-made advertisement for it. Guinness was offered as a case in point. Although few drank the stout, many appreciated the enigmatic qualities of its television spots.

This same fascination was extended to Magners' advertisements. As one student stated:

There's a Magners advert which came out a couple of months ago, where it just shows like a group of four or five friends in the middle of the countryside, right next to this big lake and when I see it, I just like aspire to them so much because it looked like they were having such a good time. They were all like happy and, you know, drinking Magners together. It really works for me that advert, as well. And I do like drinking Magners anyway so that's probably got something to do with it but yeah it's a good advert. You're just in awe of them really, aren't you?

Interestingly, although the students liked the product, as the conversation progressed it became clear that this had come as something of a surprise. Generally, cider was a drink that the groups associated with teens, the poor and alcoholics. In the summer of 2006, however, Magners had launched a marketing offensive in Liverpool bars, which had managed to overturn these prejudices:

I don't like cider. Cider reminds me of kids on the street and you walk past them and they go, go in the shop and get me a bottle of cider ...

But Magners ... it's got like ... it's sort of got like a fruit twist to it, it's not like normal cider ... It comes with ices. It's expensive as well.

I got given a free sample in Lloyds Bar. We were sitting there, me and my mates, and we all got Carling and they said do you want to try this, complimentary, you know and I had a Magners and it was nice. The ice takes the punch away.

Another student who worked in a bar commented on how amazed she was that so many of her customers were now prepared to pay a lot of money for a drink that, just a few months before, would have been positioned at the unglamorous end of the drinks spectrum.

In Liverpool, then, Magners' cider has launched a marketing and advertising campaign that successfully hitched its trailer to student drinking cultures. The accounts that students in the study tended to produce went like this. On arrival at university, young people feel under great pressure to have fun. That fun is almost always related to alcohol. Often this is because peers drink excessively, hence, at a time when making friends is a priority; to abstain is to risk social exclusion. This is amplified by the way that key moments such as Freshers' week revolve around drinking. The student environment thus creates tensions and desires that are amenable to the goals of the drinks industry. In the Magners' case, they did feel that their perception of cider had been changed, their experience of its taste altered by marketing, and their objections to its cost overcome by the 'vibe' built around the product.

This addresses two problems in the call to disband 'audience'. It must be said, 'no effects' positions compliment the drinks industry, where alcohol clearly exacts a massive social price. Moreover, if 2.0 values audience perspective, then what does it say when young people report feeling used by drinks promotions?

Bratich's 'channelling' metaphor defines media influence as capacity to focus attention and energy. In the student drinking research, this thinking proved useful in two ways. Most obviously, the key to success in alcohol advertising lies in the ability to infiltrate and facilitate the compulsion towards wild times. However, the project also identified advertising as a focal point where students could reflect *back* on how this link is manufactured, and how it related to other parts of drinking cultures.

The students *did* see themselves as sitting on the receiving end of powerful, industrially produced messages urging them to behave in proscribed ways. And often they felt vulnerable to these appeals. But that very same position also became a place where they could *critique* industrial processes. Hence, seeing themselves as an audience, in the traditional sense, was something they found useful. If media studies wishes to connect with public experience, then 'audience' remains relevant.

Short Biography

Andy Ruddock holds a PhD in Communications from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. He is the author of *Understanding Audiences* (Sage 2001) and the forthcoming *Investigating Audiences* (Sage 2007). His current research interests centre on youth media and public policy, with a special focus on binge drinking, alcohol marketing and advertising.

Note

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