



# TV LIVING



TELEVISION, CULTURE  
AND EVERYDAY LIFE

DAVID GAUNTLETT  
AND ANNETTE HILL



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# TV Living

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*TV Living* presents the findings of a British Film Institute project in which 500 participants completed detailed questionnaire-diaries over a five-year period, writing some three and a half million words on their lives, their television watching, and the relationship between the two.

David Gauntlett and Annette Hill use this extensive survey to explore some of the most fundamental questions in media and cultural studies, focusing on issues of gender, identity, the impact of new technologies, and the impact of viewers' own changing ideas and experiences. Opening up new areas of debate, the study sheds new light on audiences and their responses to issues such as sex and violence on television. The structure of the study enables the authors to track individual respondents' changing attitudes to new media as they experience life changes of their own.

Each chapter addresses a major contemporary theme in media studies: how families negotiate viewing choices, the impact of new technologies such as video, satellite and cable, how young people make the transition from children's TV to 'adult' programming, viewers' often guilty or ambivalent feelings about watching television, and audience responses to representations of women, disability, and violence. A unique study of contemporary TV audience behaviour and attitudes, *TV Living* offers a fascinating insight into the complex relationship between mass media and people's lives today.

**David Gauntlett** is Lecturer in Social Communications at the Institute of Communications Studies, University of Leeds. He is the author of *Moving Experiences: Understanding Television's Influences and Effects*, and *Video Critical: Children, The Environment and Media Power*; and edits the website [www.theory.org.uk](http://www.theory.org.uk). **Annette Hill** is Senior Lecturer in Mass Media at the Centre for Communication and Information Studies, University of Westminster. She is the author of *Shocking Entertainment: Viewer Response to Violent Movies*, and is editor of the journal *Framework*.

Both David Gauntlett and Annette Hill are Research Fellows at the British Film Institute.



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# TV Living

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Television, culture and everyday life

David Gauntlett and Annette Hill



British Film Institute

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For Susan and Don, for putting up with us, with love

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# Preface

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This study has its origins in the BFI's *One Day in the Life of Television* project, which drew together the whole TV industry, and asked ordinary viewers about their experience of television on one day, 1 November 1988. This record of television, its makers and its audience was made at a point just before the immense changes which accompanied the introduction of satellite television in Britain. Some 20,000 members of the audience took part, and their contributions were reflected in the book edited by Sean Day-Lewis. So important seemed to be the changes underway in our television-viewing possibilities at that time that the BFI decided to embark on a longitudinal study with a small proportion of the original diarists. So was born the five-year Audience Tracking Study, and it is data from this project which forms the basis of this book.

The green light for the study was given by David Docherty, then Head of Research at the Broadcasting Standards Council, who believed that such a study was timely and provided the initial funding. The Council's (now Broadcasting Standards Commission) grant helped fund data collection for five years with Andrea Millwood Hargrave continuing to support the project when she took over the research role at the BSC. We would like to thank the members of the Audience Tracking Study advisory group, Jay Blumler, David Docherty, Andrea Millwood Hargrave and Roger Silverstone, for their advice and encouragement particularly during the design and development of the study.

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Thanks are also due to staff at the BFI, who during their careers there have made great contributions to this study: Jacintha Cusack for her invaluable assistance in the administration of the project and the storage of the data; Duncan Petrie, who was there at the beginning and co-edited the first book on the study, *Television and the Household*; and Alison Preston, who gave advice on diary design and had a special interest in the news.

We are particularly grateful to the writers, David Gauntlett and Annette Hill, who have managed to steer their way through the three and a half million words accumulated between 1991 and 1996 and have written so accessibly and interestingly about the role of television in people's everyday lives. They have been ably assisted by the research assistant at the BFI, Rob Turnock, who developed a method for finding a way through the data and who has advised at every stage of the process.

Finally we would like to thank the 450-plus television viewers who have stayed with us for so long, completing and returning their diaries over five years, and without whose generous and continued support this project would have been impossible.

Richard Paterson and Janet Willis  
The British Film Institute

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Annette extends special love and thanks to Don Butler, who cooks a mean chilli every night of the week. David's love and gratitude goes to Susan Giblin, a sparkly star, who (thankfully) doesn't.

# Chapter I

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## Introduction

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Most of us carry television with us throughout our lives – albeit not, at the time of writing, literally. As children, the authors of this book had toys based on TV favourites, and we still struggle to fit paperwork on our desks without disturbing the plastic Dalek (pull back, trundles forward) and the die-cast metal Starship Enterprise (with alarming photon torpedoes). Sipping coffee from an *EastEnders* mug, we contemplate the books we have read and the different ways of looking at things we have acquired because of some TV series. At the age of 10 one of our favourite publications was the BBC book *Points of View* – based on the long-running show which airs viewers’ letters about BBC programmes – published in 1981 (£1.50), and edited by its then presenter, the genial Barry Took. Since it involves people writing about television, it has some chilling similarities to this book, although we hope that our analysis is rather more sociological. Nevertheless, Took’s book cuts straight to many of the same issues, with children often providing some of the best quotes. Ten-year-old Helen Steel, for example, provided this insight into family life around the television set:

I like everything just like my Dad, even if he does not like the thing he still watches it. Mam says the box rules our life but i think thats stupid.

Similarly, Jonathan Chamberlain of Derby, aged 8, was beginning to get to grips with issues of sex and violence:

My brother and I think Star Trek tonight was a waste of time. Grown ups kissing each other and saying sloppy things ugh it was dreadful. Please give us more fighting.

Perhaps the most refreshing letter was this acute methodological critique, from an anonymous child, and quoted here in full:

Dear barry took. Why Do you get letters off people.

We know this feeling.

Like many other British viewers we also acquired a vague idea of what longitudinal social studies were about as we encountered programmes like *28 Up* and, seven years later, *35 Up*. These were part of a TV project which stems back to May 1964, when ITV broadcast a programme made by the *World in Action* documentary unit entitled *Seven Up*, which presented a group of fourteen 7-year-olds who were supposed to represent a cross-section of British children. Every seven years since then, update programmes have followed the group through their lives, with eleven of them still participating in 1998's *42 Up*. Its creator, Tim Hewat, was an Australian who had come to Britain and felt that it was 'fascinating, and appalling, the way class seemed to stamp someone's life from very early on', and he has described the programmes – directed by film-maker Michael Apted since 1970 – as 'the most remarkable documentary series in the history of television' (O'Hagan 1998). As the follow-up programmes had not been a part of *Seven Up*'s original design, the sample is not ideal. Its political emphasis on class differences meant that the fourteen included a comical trio of posh boys who could name the Cambridge colleges which they would attend, and only four girls (which Apted, who put the sample together as a researcher on the first show, now regrets).

Nevertheless, the sequence of programmes is a fascinating sociological resource. Like this study, they provide no really simple and straightforward conclusions, but reflect interestingly upon class in modern Britain (often but not always confirming the original suspicion that class would circumscribe the participants' destinies). The participants often convey sadness and regrets as they examine their lives, although they were generally satisfied with 'their lot', and are everyday yet remarkable examples of how people adjust to what life deals them. Through the unpredictable course of their lives, we also see their search for a place of *belonging* – a search which is only occasionally mucked up by the curse of being reluctant minor TV stars.

Taken together, the *Points of View* book and the *Seven Up* programmes represent the popular and rather more simple versions of what the BFI Audience Tracking Study, the major research project discussed in this book, was engaged in. Unlike *Points of View*, the respondents were meant to be reasonably representative, and were systematically asked to write about their lives as well as their media use and opinions, in an open diary-questionnaire, three times a year. Unlike *Seven Up*, our project covered five years – but involved around five hundred people. But just as the *Seven Up* documentaries managed to convey something of the richness and variety of the lives of different individuals in the course of relatively short TV programmes, we hope that we have also captured some of the detail and texture of the lives of our diarists, even though condensing all of that material into the confines of one book was, frankly, a struggle.

The method used in the present study, although conducted here on an unusually large scale, is not entirely new. In his account of the development of the BBC Audience Research Unit, Robert Silvey (1974) has noted that, at first, broadcasters did not feel any need to seek out their audience's attitudes and feelings. For ten years the BBC ignored the issue of

audience research entirely: ‘When anyone suggested that [the Corporation] was out of touch with its public, it would point to its postbag. Listeners had not waited to be asked their opinions; they had volunteered them’ (1974: 28). Silvey was hired by the BBC in 1936 to set up a unit which would establish a more systematic approach to the study of BBC listeners. Silvey conducted large-scale, quantitative, longitudinal research, seeing the audience as ‘customers’ at the ‘department store’ called the BBC (Ang 1991: 142). In 1937, when Silvey decided to find out more about listeners for light entertainment radio programmes, he arranged for an announcement on the radio and in the *Radio Times*, the TV listings magazine published by the BBC, calling for volunteers for the study: 47,000 listeners offered their services. Throughout the second world war, the Audience Research Unit supplied important information to the BBC, and began to develop a picture of what the audience themselves liked and loathed about their radio broadcasts. Scannell and Cardiff (1991) note that Mass Observation’s survey on the occasion of the 1937 Coronation recorded people’s actions and feelings throughout the day as they listened, from their own homes, to the king being crowned. Mass observation was also used throughout the war as a means to judge the opinion of the people (Curran and Seaton 1997: 131). This early form of market research can be seen to share some similarities with survey and focus group research used today to judge the opinion of the people. There are also some similarities between mass observation and the BFI Audience Tracking Study, which also used diaries to ascertain the relationship between media and everyday life. However, before we consider the BFI study, we should take a look at the development of ethnographic audience research, a type of research which has influenced our approach to audiences and everyday life.

## STUDYING TELEVISION AND EVERYDAY LIFE

### In Morley’s footsteps

No study of television, the household and everyday life could get away with ignoring David Morley’s work in this area, if only because he was one of the first to do qualitative research in the domestic TV-watching environment, which means that his relatively small-scale *Family Television* study (1986) has been much-discussed – not least of all by Morley himself (whose 1992 book *Television, Audiences and Cultural Studies* recycles, but also engagingly and critically discusses, the same material). ‘My own interests,’ Morley explained, ‘have increasingly come to focus on the *how* of television watching – in the sense of understanding how the process of television viewing is done as an activity’ (1992: 133). Rather than examining people’s responses to the content of particular TV programmes, as his earlier *Nationwide* study (1980) had done, Morley turned his attention to the *activity* of viewing, for whole families. In doing so he emphasised, implicitly and explicitly, the need to understand individuals in the social context of their everyday domestic lives.



Morley criticises his own study of responses to *Nationwide*, a relatively lightweight TV current affairs show, for having assumed that ‘deep structures’ such as class positions would have direct ‘effects’ upon individuals’ responses to the material. He subsequently acknowledges that whilst factors such as class, ethnicity and gender will have some impact upon which ‘cultural codes’ a person has access to, we also have to consider that individual’s own responses to their social situation. ‘To paraphrase Sartre,’ Morley says, ‘it is a question of what we make of what history has made of us’ (1992: 136). On a more practical level, though just as importantly, he notes that the method of his *Nationwide* study, in which groups were shown recordings of the show, effectively caused his participants to ‘produce’ responses to a programme which they, in many cases, would not have had on, or would have ignored. This latter point indicates one of the key differences between Morley’s *Family Television* and a whole mass of other studies (of which his own *Nationwide* research was but one example): it recognised that in the domestic context, the TV set being *on* was not synonymous with its output being *watched*. (Morley was partly influenced by the work of James Lull (1982), who had studied the ways in which programmes were selected for viewing in the home environment; Lull’s work is discussed further below.)

Acting upon his arguments as outlined above, Morley sought to reject the individual-centred approach altogether and decided that ‘the basic unit of consumption of television [should] be the family/household rather than the individual viewer’ (1992: 138), although Morley himself admits that in the actual study this would often partly slip back, inevitably perhaps, into an analysis of the individuals who made up the unit (1992: 159). Even so, this would nevertheless produce an account of people’s attitudes and behaviour seen within the broader family or household context, which would still be a significant improvement over the approach which assumed that the individual viewer would be ‘making programme choices as if he or she were a rational consumer in a free and perfect market’, described by Morley quite rightly as ‘the height of absurdity when we are talking about people living in families’ (1992: 139).

The findings of the *Family Television* study, which involved eighteen households in South London, are discussed in chapter eight (on gendered uses of TV), and also show up briefly in chapter six (on uses of video), as Morley’s central finding was that gender was the one factor that cut across all of the other differences in the households that he studied: put simply, the men would almost always dominate the TV. It will also be seen that in the present study, we found that this was not usually the case, and we found little evidence of the polarised gender preferences (men liking realism, women loving romance) which Morley also describes. Although Morley goes to some lengths to emphasise that he does not consider his sample representative of the national population, and that his findings are the social product of a particular quarter of culture, there is nevertheless a kind of implicit claim that he is describing

a more general phenomenon, and inevitably Morley's findings have appeared in textbooks shorn of the author's cautious qualifications. This means that Morley's work ends up being curiously *unhelpful*, reinforcing rather than breaking down the gender distinctions which Morley himself is critical of. (It should be noted that Morley himself recognises that this is a problem; Morley 1992: 160.)

Nevertheless, Morley's work was important because of its household-centred methodology, an approach reflected (in a somewhat different way) in the Audience Tracking Study presented in this book. And despite what we have said above, Morley did well to bring the important sociological issue of gender into a field which was dominated by awful pseudo-scientific, individualistic, psychological approaches to media audiences. (The shame is that his polarised report of gender differences sat all too easily with the deterministic work on gender in the self-styled psychological 'sciences'.)

### **Some other studies of media and everyday life**

Morley has perhaps received a disproportionate amount of coverage in the literature on this area, given that a number of other researchers were conducting other interesting qualitative studies of people's uses of the media within everyday life at around the same time. Ann Gray (1987, 1992) conducted in-depth interviews in West Yorkshire with thirty mostly working-class women, in 1985–86. Gray explored their everyday lives and their feelings about domestic technology, with a particular focus on the video cassette recorder (VCR). Like Morley, Gray found that 'Gender is the key determinant in the use of and expertise in specific pieces of domestic equipment' (1992: 187), and identifies quite different gendered attitudes to the VCR, with men considering the watching of an action movie on video a welcome leisure event, whilst women are less interested in the VCR generally, and since the home is not a site of leisure for them, would rather go out. At the same time, again like Morley, Gray finds that some of these women like to steal moments of guilty pleasure from romantic love stories on video (see chapter eight). The detailed and rich interviews which Gray draws upon make this study an important contribution to our more detailed understanding of television and video in the home, and by focusing on women, the research was also valuable for bringing these often marginalised voices to light.

In fact, Gray was not the first to put women at the centre of her ethnographic audience research: Dorothy Hobson had also conducted two ethnographic research projects that are relevant to this study. In the late 1970s, Hobson (1980) undertook a study of the relationship between housewives and the mass media. She found that radio broadcasts provided a series of marker points in the day; housewives used the radio to alleviate stress and feelings of loneliness, and would often have it on in the background whilst they completed household

chores. Hobson also discovered that women clearly saw a difference between the type of programmes they liked to watch on television (comedy series, or soap operas) and the programmes their husbands watched (news and current affairs programmes). In her subsequent research on viewers of *Crossroads*, an early-evening soap opera about life in a motel, Hobson (1982) made an important contribution to ethnographic audience research. She interviewed women in their homes and observed the domestic environment, often noting that women were engaged in a complex series of activities, such as cooking the evening meal, whilst at the same time attempting to watch their favourite soap on the television. Hobson found that: 'watching television is part of the everyday life of viewers' and many of the programmes that her respondents enjoyed were transmitted in 'a period of frantic activity in their daily lives' (1982: 110). She also found that in response to this, many women developed interesting ways of half-watching or listening to the programme while they were organising the evening meal. She described the difference between watching *Crossroads* with an elderly woman, who served tea, and put her knitting aside to watch the programme uninterrupted, and watching it with a woman who was 'serving the evening meal, feeding her five- and three-year-old daughters and attempting to watch the programme on a black and white television situated on top of the freezer opposite the kitchen table' (1982: 112). Hobson's research clearly showed that television programmes were incorporated into the framework of everyday life and that people watched television in a variety of different ways.

James Lull has conducted several important ethnographic studies in television viewing, focusing on families in America and China (1980, 1982, 1990). Lull was one of the first American sociologists to apply ethnography to family viewing practices, and he used anthropology and ethnomethodology (observation of routine behaviours) to consider the social uses of television in the home. In the 1970s, over a three-year period, Lull conducted a research project that focused on 200 families living in California and Wisconsin. The researchers lived with the families for two to seven days, making sure that they took part in the day-to-day routine of the household, and these periods of observation in the field meant that Lull had a well-grounded account of television and everyday life. From this research, he concluded that 'the social uses of television are of two primary types: structural and relational' (1990: 35). Television can act as an 'environmental source', or background noise; and it can act as a 'regulative source', a punctuation of time and activity: these are the *structural* uses of television. The *relational* uses are more complex: television can act to facilitate communication, or as a means to open up conversation; it can act as an 'affiliation or avoidance', a means to bring the family together and also to create conflict; it can encourage 'social learning', such as providing information or problem-solving skills; and it can be a focus for 'competence/dominance', for example as a means to exert authority, or

facilitate an argument (1990: 36). Lull therefore established some important conceptual reference points for studies of television in the home.

As we are surveying previous notable ethnographic studies of media use from the 1980s, we should also mention Patricia Palmer's study of children and TV, *The Lively Audience* (1986). The study's three-stage methodology involved interviews with sixty-four children (aged 8–12), observation of twenty-three children's viewing in the home environment for a total of nine hours each, and a questionnaire survey of 486 other youngsters. As the book's title suggests, the findings were a refutation of the idea that children's TV viewing is 'passive' and not mentally engaging. Television viewing was found to be associated with 'fun, excitement and finding out about the world' (1986: 132), although the youngsters were selective and critical about the programmes which they watched. Children interacted with the TV set in a variety of ways, although not always with rapt attention: sometimes TV programmes were 'monitored' whilst the child focused on some other activity, and at other times television simply became a 'background' to family life, which carried on around the set (1986: 133–4). Talk about TV with friends was found to be a part of everyday routine, and provided 'an important basis of shared experience for children'. Palmer's study therefore captured a number of ways in which television was a meaningful, but not overpowering, part of children's everyday lives.

Further qualitative research on the family, media and everyday life appeared in two research projects by Rogge and Jensen (1988), conducted in West Germany in 1981 and 1986. The researchers were aware that 'each family undergoes different cycles of development. Such cycles are characterised by continuity and change in communication and media habits' (Rogge 1991: 172). They interviewed 420 families in total and used multiple-level analysis (taking into account other social factors) in order to situate media-related activities within the larger picture of the world of work, or other social activities. Rogge and Jensen talk about family experience and 'media worlds'. Family experience is not static:

It encompasses the past, present and the future, as becomes apparent from the two concepts, family biography and family cycle. Everyday life is lived out in a field of tension formed by individual and family biographies, socio-cultural and social structures, and socio-historical processes of development.

(Rogge 1991: 173)

This dynamic account of family experience is linked to the concept of everyday media knowledge, a 'media world', where each family constructs an understanding of television programmes which is based on their own interpretation of what these programmes mean to

the family. Media worlds, the study therefore suggested, 'are the product of meaning-making within the family' (Rogge 1991: 173). Later studies, such as Joke Hermes's *Reading Women's Magazines* (1995), based on eighty in-depth interviews, and Marie Gillespie's *Television, Ethnicity, and Cultural Change* (1995), based on more traditional ethnographic fieldwork – two years spent with the South Asian communities in an area of West London – are discussed later in this book.

The qualitative media research of the 1980s, such as those studies mentioned above – and Ien Ang's *Watching Dallas* (1985), which is discussed below – led to a general enthusiasm within media and cultural studies for what have come to be known, as we have already mentioned in passing, as 'ethnographic' studies. This term is not wholly inappropriate, as it reflects an engagement with everyday life and qualitative research; however, its meaning here is rather different from the way in which sociologists have traditionally understood 'ethnography', as research based on truly *lived-in* experience, where the researcher would spend several months or even years with their subjects. Critics might say that it is evidence of the short attention spans allegedly produced by TV, that media scholars have been satisfied with their 'ethnographies' based on a handful of afternoon chats. Shaun Moores, in his book on media ethnography, has to admit that on the whole the set of studies which he discusses 'have relied mainly on audio-taped conversations with viewers, listeners and readers which may not last much more than an hour each' (1993: 4).

Nevertheless, the rise of these qualitative studies, which we can call 'ethnographic' since that has now become an accepted (mis)use of the term, has been an extremely important development in media audience studies. By introducing the everyday context in which elements of the mass media are used, and by allowing media consumers to express or demonstrate what they make of these media in their own ways, such research has provided a much-needed antidote to the tradition of research based in the tradition of 'psychology', where a determination to appear 'scientific' has meant that people's own everyday interpretations have been deliberately excluded from the studies. Ien Ang (1991, 1996), David Morley (1992) and Roger Silverstone (1994), in particular, have all spent a lot of time writing about how valuable this kind of research is, and how important it is that we do more of it.

### **Silverstone and the paralysis of research**

Roger Silverstone's *Television and Everyday Life* (1994) is a theoretical study of the relationship between television and domestic space. Silverstone asks about television, 'How is it that such a technology and medium has found its way so profoundly and intimately into the fabric of our daily lives?' (1994: 2). His book is an attempt to answer this question through consideration of ethnographic audience research and more theoretical approaches to

the public and the private, the spatial and temporal in relation to television.

Silverstone is critical of empirical research that does not take into account the social environment, or what he calls ‘the experience of television’ (1994: 2). Silverstone identifies two general approaches that fail in this regard. First there is the kind of work that emphasises qualities of the *text* (the content of the TV programme) in relation to audiences, such as Livingstone’s research on soap operas (1990), and Brunson and Morley’s work on *Nationwide*’s content (1978, prior to Morley’s 1980 study of peoples’ actual responses to the show). This kind of research is praised for the way it provides a link between the social and ‘text-centred explanations of audience activity’ (1994: 148), but is still seen to be lacking in its account of the social environment, television and everyday life.

Second there are the studies that focus on *effects* and the audience, such as cultivation analysis (Gerbner *et al.* 1980, 1986; Morgan and Signorielli: 1990). Cultivation analysis hypothesises that people who watch larger amounts of TV will be more likely to think that the real world is like the world shown on TV. Unfortunately the approach sheds only limited light upon this interesting idea owing to its (American) scientific, quantitative methodology, which uses surveys in a bid to find statistical correlations which, paradoxically, are often themselves meaningless because of the oversimplistic questionnaire-based data.<sup>1</sup> Whilst Silverstone maintains that ‘Cultivation analysis provides a powerful and relevant framework from which to approach television’s place in contemporary society’ (1994: 140), he nevertheless rejects it for failing to consider the social dynamics of television within the household.

Silverstone argues that in the above types of study, ‘the television audience still seems to emerge...rather like plankton floating on the surface of the Gulf Stream and the North Atlantic drift’ (1994: 140). What is lacking from this research is proper consideration of the audience’s *engagement* with television. As Silverstone explains it:

We engage with television through the same practices that define our involvement with the rest of everyday life, practices that are themselves contained by, but also constitutive of, the basic symbolic, material, and political structures which make any and every social action possible.

(1994: 170)

Silverstone goes on to define a theory of television, technology and everyday life that is based around the concepts of ontological security (a sense of security in oneself in relation to the patterns of everyday life), questions of agency, and the relationship between domesticity and consumption. However, Silverstone’s theoretical account of television and everyday life could be regarded as premature. Before we can begin to understand the symbolic, material and political structures in everyday life, it is important to consider what people have to say about

their own experience of television and everyday life, and the practicalities of television in the domestic space. Indeed, Silverstone has been criticised for publishing a book entitled *Television and Everyday Life* which proposes a number of densely worded theoretical hypotheses, but contains very little grounded analysis of either television or everyday life as they are actually experienced in the world.

In partial explanation of this, perhaps, Ien Ang (1996) has argued that the recognition of the need to include the context of everyday life in media audience research has led to a kind of paralysis amongst researchers. She quotes Morley and Silverstone's observation (in 1990) that 'the use of television cannot be separated from everything else that is going on around it' (Ang 1996: 68), but suggests that they have taken this rather too literally and required that research must record absolutely *everything* – not only the domestic context, but the context of that context (the neighbourhood?), the context of *that* context (the nation?), and so on. Obviously here both the baby and the bathwater have been launched into orbit.

Ang suggests that this 'radical contextualism' has produced a feeling – unsurprisingly, perhaps – that, since this approach suggests that all aspects of everyday life have to be studied in order to understand the place of the media, the project is simply too big to do. Only crazy researchers would attempt such a task. This is an interesting point for us, since the Audience Tracking Study, which this book is about, *is* just such a project, with almost every bit of domestic context, radical or not, documented somewhere in the three and a half million words which the respondents produced.

### **Research where audiences produce texts**

The present study is not the first, of course, to get people to produce considered texts about their media consumption. Ien Ang's study *Watching Dallas* (1985, first published in Dutch in 1982) has become one of the most famous projects in the field of qualitative audience research, perhaps because it was one of the first studies to treat audiences of popular media seriously, and did so by sympathetically analysing their own responses to the subject. As Ang notes, at the start of the 1980s, the American soap saga *Dallas* (1978–91) was hugely popular in Holland, and much of the rest of the world ('in over ninety countries...from Turkey to Australia, from Hong Kong to Great Britain' (1985: 1)). Ang was unconvinced by those commentators who saw this success as the height of American cultural imperialism – after all, no-one was *forcing* over half of her country's population to watch the show each week – but also noted the ambivalent, love–hate relationship which she and others had with the series. Ang placed an advertisement in a Dutch women's magazine which invited people to write to her with their accounts of why they liked or disliked the show. The forty-two letters which she received in reply formed the basis of her study. Ang's analysis of these

viewers' texts suggested that people enjoyed and related to *Dallas* because they found it *emotionally realistic* – not, of course, because they were oil millionaires themselves, but because the characters' series of domestic problems, rows, moments of happiness, and relationship disappointments, were readily identified with. For some of these viewers *Dallas* also presented a fantasy of happiness and fulfilment in its presentation of one happier relationship, between the characters Pamela and Bobby, which apparently gave them some hope for their own lives. Other people claimed to watch *Dallas* ironically, without taking it seriously, whilst even some who purported to hate the show clearly didn't feel that this should stop them watching it.

Inevitably, perhaps, Ang has to observe that there is no singular explanation for the popularity of *Dallas*. Each viewer 'has his or her own more or less unique relationship to the programme' (1985: 26). It is to Ang's credit that she was able to identify common themes and threads from her respondents' divergent comments. Without wanting to sound too self-pitying, we can note that the more data a researcher has, the more difficult it becomes to come up with distinctive generalisations – because the general conclusion that 'everyone is a bit different, everything is very complex' becomes more and more powerful. (In the study reported in this book, we have more than 200 times the amount of data that Ang had.<sup>2</sup>)

Ang's *Dallas* study, then, pioneered the detailed study of 'trivial' (but culturally significant) tastes through the analysis of the audience's own responses. It is of particular significance here as the respondents were producing written texts at home, to a particular question about television, because they were willing to participate in that type of research – which has obvious similarities with our present study.

In a group of research projects which took a different angle, seeking to identify media *influences* rather than views and responses, several researchers connected to the Glasgow Media Group have asked participants to write their own news headlines or reports to accompany actual news photographs or headlines which they are given, or sometimes asked to write scripts to accompany other material (see for example Kitlinger, 1990, 1993; Philo, 1990, 1996; Miller, 1994). These studies generally show that the respondents often reproduce the language and ideological approach of the original news reports – although in several of the studies there is the serious problem that the participants may be consciously mimicking or parodying the original material, and the researchers often fail to address this adequately, instead tending to see the reproduced discourses as an 'effect'.

One such study is Greg Philo's work (1996) on the media's representation of mental illness, and the possible influence of this upon viewers. Participants were given the *Daily Mirror*'s 1993 headline 'Set on fire by a maniac', accompanied by a photograph of a young boy, and asked to write the story. The texts produced reflected the tone and assumptions of tabloid coverage of the story. Taking a different approach in the same study, Philo also asked participants to write a script to accompany photographs of scenes from a 1993 storyline in



the soap opera *Coronation Street* which involved a young woman who was ‘obsessed’, *Fatal Attraction* style, with one of the male characters. Only those who had watched the show were asked to participate in this part of the study, and they remembered the language and attitudes of the characters well, and generally found this female character frightening. The report and script-writing elements of this study seem to confirm, then, that the mentally ill are often demonised in the media, and that these features stick in the minds of the audience. They do not really tell us about the extent to which this may have affected the participants’ view of the mentally ill in real life, although in discussions some individuals revealed that they had known or spent time with mentally ill people and had not found them to be violent, and yet they still associated mental illness with the kind of violent ‘psycho’ seen in many movies. Used in conjunction with other interview-style methods, then, this method is an innovative and revealing use of texts produced by audience members themselves.

Also relevant in this context is the qualitative, broadly ethnographic study by David Gauntlett, published as *Video Critical: Children, the Environment and Media Power* (1997). In this research project, the author worked with groups of around eight children at each of seven primary schools, as they made videos on the subject of ‘the environment’. The broader aim of the study was to explore the impact of the coverage of environmental issues on television, which had been quite considerable since the late 1980s, on children’s awareness and concern about the environment.

The study found that when making their *own* videos about environmental matters, children would tend to reproduce the emphasis found in most children’s TV programmes on the subject, which focused on small-scale local solutions – such as recycling and conservation of resources at home – and ignored the macro, industrial and governmental causes of large-scale pollution and environmental damage. When understood as another way of studying children’s responses to the media – through their own media productions – this new research method could be seen as a progression from the studies discussed above, with the participants producing video ‘texts’, rather than written ones (or the spoken ‘texts’ produced in focus-group or interview settings), which would be taken by the researcher to reflect their responses to the mass media. The method also allowed the children involved to demonstrate their impressive media literacy, and to generate their own repudiation of the other kind of research, particularly from the discipline of psychology, which has traditionally disenfranchised young people and not recognised their capacities in relation to the mass media. In a similar way, the Audience Tracking Study gave a voice to everyday viewers, inviting them to bring their own concerns to the fore in the research process – although then, of course, researchers such as ourselves have to pick up on these themes, rather than ignore them; which brings us to our methodology.

## THE AUDIENCE TRACKING STUDY METHODOLOGY

The 1988 *One Day in the Life of Television* project marked the beginning of the present study. This ‘mass observation’ project involved 22,000 people from around the United Kingdom who wrote a diary about their television viewing for 1 November 1988. These respondents had been recruited via an extremely visible advertising campaign – in the press, on posters and leaflets, and in particular on television itself, with announcements placed in peak slots next to mainstream programmes. This study’s participants included both media practitioners and viewers, and a book (edited by Sean Day-Lewis, 1989) and documentary were produced after the event as a record of what the nation had to say about the role of television in 1988. This project showed that people had a great deal to say about television, and Day-Lewis used extracts from diarists to indicate that the British public is discerning in its television viewing and has ‘a firm idea of what constitutes acceptable, and trashy, television’ (1989: xiv). In many ways the *One Day in the Life of Television* project marks a period in British television that could be considered as the old order of broadcasting, before the 1990 Broadcasting Act changed the nature of the industry, then dominated by the BBC–ITV duopoly, to incorporate a more competitive, multi-channel approach.

The BFI Audience Tracking Study respondents were picked from this large, self-selected sample, and invited to participate. Janet Willis, Richard Paterson and Duncan Petrie had constructed a sample that was generally representative of the population as a whole. Variables such as sex, age, marital status, region, occupation, and household size and composition were taken into account. The longitudinal study was designed to run from 1991 to 1996, and consisted of fifteen questionnaire diaries completed by an initial 509 respondents, which had dropped to 427 respondents at the end of the project. The problem of attrition – respondents dropping out – is widely recognised as a serious problem for longitudinal studies (Dex 1991: 5), and the fact that 84 per cent of diarists stayed with the study is a remarkable testament to the commitment of the BFI research team, who sent them birthday and Christmas cards every year, and wrote personally in response to major developments which appeared in the diaries (such as serious illness, or the death of a partner), as well as in reply to diarists’ other notes and queries.

Table 1.1 shows the breakdown by age group at the start of the study.

*Table 1.1* Breakdown of respondents by age group, compared with the general UK population, 1991

| Age      | Tracking Study | UK population <sup>a</sup> |
|----------|----------------|----------------------------|
| Under 16 | 9%             | 29%                        |
| 16–39    | 33%            | 35%                        |
| 40–64    | 29%            | 29%                        |
| 65+      | 29%            | 16%                        |

Note

<sup>a</sup> *Social trends 1991*

We can see, then, that the sample is under-representative of the under-16 age group and over-representative of the 65 and over age group, compared to the UK population figures for 1991. Women are also very slightly over-represented, with 53 per cent of the sample female, and 47 per cent male. The respondents were fairly well educated; in 1995, 24 per cent had or were about to have a higher education degree, and a further 16 per cent had been in further education. Twenty-one per cent of the sample were in full-time education at the start of the study, and 35 per cent were retired, which shows a bias towards students and retired people in the study overall. The income for the majority of diarists was £10,000–20,000 (25 per cent), with just over 17 per cent receiving between £5,000 and £10,000, and with as many as 27 per cent of respondents earning less than £5,000 in a year, again reflecting the number of low-income students and retired people in the sample.

In terms of geographical location, the sample was spread across a range of areas of the United Kingdom, with people living in the south, central and northern parts of England, Scotland and Wales, with a small percentage of respondents living in the Channel Islands and in Northern Ireland. Similarly, respondents lived in rural areas, villages, small and large towns, and cities. (See Appendix for full details.)

The BFI did not record the ethnicity of diarists, and no questions were asked about ethnicity or racial issues. This has meant that, unfortunately, we were unable to address in this book questions of ethnicity in relation to either broadcasting content or reception. It seems likely that ethnic minorities were under-represented in this study, and this – along with the lack of data on these related issues – has been disappointing.

Because of the nature of this study, which takes into consideration the significance of change over a five-year period within family and household life, our sense of what ‘the family’ means must take into account the notion that ‘the family’ is not a fixed entity, but something that is in constant state of flux. Silverstone has noted that ‘researchers need to recognise...that families are problematic entities, not only in terms of their composition, but also in terms of their changing character in modern society’ (1994: 33). He refers to Pitkin (1985) and Wilson and Pahl (1988), who have claimed that ‘the study of the family should be the study of process...the family should be understood in the terms in which family members themselves define it’ (Silverstone 1994: 32). This is basically the approach taken in the present study, where the study of process is from the perspective of household members themselves. We have given particular attention to different household compositions, such as single-parent families, student accommodation, and households with only one adult, as well as the more traditional composition of the nuclear family, reflecting the changing nature of household composition in the 1990s. Table 1.2 shows how the households were composed.

*Table 1.2* Composition of respondents' households, compared with the general UK population, 1991

| <i>Type of household</i>    | <i>Tracking Study</i> | <i>UK population<sup>a</sup></i> |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------------------|
| Single person               | 22%                   | 26%                              |
| Two adults                  | 29%                   | 28%                              |
| Two adults and two children | 24%                   | 24%                              |
| Single parents              | 2%                    | 10%                              |
| Others                      | 23%                   | 12%                              |

*Notes*

<sup>a</sup>*Social Trends* 1991

<sup>b</sup>More than two adults, including families with non-dependent children, student households, halls of residence, etc.

In terms of technology, the respondents in this study had access to a range of equipment. In 1991, 31 per cent of respondents had one television in their household; 38 per cent had two TVs; 18 per cent had three TVs; 7 per cent had four; and 4 per cent had five TVs. In 1996, the figures remained similar. In 1991, 59 per cent of the sample had one video cassette recorder in their household; 11 per cent had two; 3 per cent had more than two; and 27 per cent did not have one at all. In 1996, only 13 per cent said that they did not have a video, and 21 per cent of the sample had two videos in the household, showing an overall rise in the number of videos from 1991 to 1996. The majority of respondents (90 per cent) had a television with a remote control, and 68 per cent had teletext. In 1991 around 7 per cent had satellite and cable services (6.8 per cent satellite, 1.3 per cent cable) and this had gone up to around 26 per cent in 1996 (20.4 per cent satellite, 5.3 per cent cable). Nearly everyone in the sample had at least one radio in the household (98.8 per cent), and around 17 per cent had video cameras by 1996. Those who had telephone answering machines numbered 38 per cent, and nearly half of the sample had a personal computer in 1996 (48.7 per cent), but only 8 per cent had an internet connection.

Janet Willis and Duncan Petrie, the primary coordinators of the study as it ran, explain how the data was collected three times a year throughout the five-year period:

The first *One Day* project required respondents to complete an unstructured diary about their viewing...For the Tracking Study the diary format was extended to include structured questions relating to television viewing, household compositions, and daily

routines, alongside more open evaluative sections soliciting opinions about specific programmes, or TV genres, and topical issues concerning television in general. In addition, a viewing chart was constructed on which respondents could note the programmes they watched on the day in question, with whom they watched them, the amount of attention given to these and whether they had planned to watch them.

(Petrie and Willis 1995: 4)

Various different approaches were taken, as we began to consider the collected data, to manage and collate the amount of information that had developed over this five-year period. As we have already mentioned, the diarists had managed to write a collective three and a half million words. The question was: how were we to become familiar with this data, and how would we best navigate our way through the diaries? Should we consider each individual diarist on their own, or look at subsets of people, or group responses to themes, such as daytime TV, or media violence?

Ethnographic research, according to Baszanger and Dodier, has three requirements: '1, the need for an empirical approach; 2, the need to remain open to elements that cannot be codified at the time of the study; 3, a concern for grounding the phenomena observed in the field' (1997: 8). We have already discussed the need for an empirical approach to television audiences. The 'need to remain open' is very important to qualitative research. In this study, the data collection was rigorous, with the diaries being sent out three times each year,<sup>3</sup> and including some standardised questions in order to ensure that there was a guide for both the researcher and the people in the study. However, at the same time it was important to remain open to new data and be able to respond to the longitudinal nature of the study, focusing on change over the five years. As Petrie and Willis note above, the respondents were asked a combination of standardised and one-off open-ended questions in each diary, enabling them to give on-going accounts and reflections on their lives in general, and media use in particular, as well as enabling the researchers to collect their thoughts on a range of different issues in different diaries. Some questions about uses of and interaction around the TV were posed in varied ways on separate occasions. In studies involving grounded *observation*, the researcher must ensure that they relate what they have observed to the wider context in which this has taken place (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss 1987). In the case of this study, which of course did not involve physical observation of the respondents at home, we had nevertheless to ensure that any findings were grounded in a specific context, and therefore the diarists' own descriptions of their home life, despite their subjectivity, were vital here. After some exploratory work, we arrived at a way of storing and examining the data which would allow us to access various themes, incidents and opinions whilst keeping the data within its all-important context (see Appendix for details).

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## How we approached the data

As we began work on this project, some people asked us, ‘What theory are you using?’ We found this difficult to answer, and slightly bewildering. We were not intent on clamping *any* preconceived theory onto our data. It is not that we have anything against theory: on the contrary, our interests are almost entirely theoretical; we engage with empirical research only because we recognise that theory which has no connection with the world and how people perceive it is, to put it politely, lacking something. But in any case, the way that researchers use the term ‘theory’ in this context is slightly fanciful. What they basically mean is, ‘What are the interests and concerns which you are going to pursue?’, which is much easier to answer.

First of all, we wanted to be led by the respondents, as it were, rather than approach the data with a set of questions, concerns and assumptions which the diaries would simply confirm or deny. Naturally, we had a range of interests and issues which we imagined the diaries would illuminate, but we have tried to follow up new leads presented by the data itself, and sought to pay closer attention to the issues and material which the data itself made more pressing. To illustrate this point, for example, when we were securing a contract for this book’s publication, we were unable to tell our publishers, Routledge, exactly what would be in it. We indicated a range of areas which we thought would be likely to be fruitful – under advice from those at the BFI who, at that time, knew more about the respondents and their diaries than we did – and some topics which we thought were important enough for us to pursue them anyway, such as gender issues, and views about screen violence (which steadfastly refuses to stop being a controversial area in media audience research). It can be noted that in some ways the latter areas – violence in particular – which we worked on early in the analysis period, are concerned with people’s views about TV *content*, and therefore differ from the rest of the book. The way in which our approach steadily changed to be increasingly aligned with the ‘grounded’ theme of ‘television as part of everyday life’ can be seen in the way the rest of the book developed. A chapter that we had offered to do on ‘technology’, for example, which had not at first sounded like a very engaging theme, turned out to be full of good stuff as we found that people had absorbed TV-related technologies, such as video, into their everyday lives in a number of creative ways. A chapter on news, which we had originally imagined might involve people’s opinions of news programmes, turned out necessarily to be about how people arrange their time and punctuate their days in relation to news broadcasts.

The theme of *change* over the five years of the study also turned out to be enormously important. Our initial focus on some stock ‘media studies’-type questions meant that we failed to recognise the real importance of this theme at first: after all, we thought, people’s views on TV violence, say, would probably be similar in 1996 to what they were in 1991. This remained true, on the whole, but is something of a red herring, since the important and interesting changes (which we forgot at first) are the *changes in people’s lives*. These changes cannot be missed in the diaries: people grow older, get married, get divorced, get a job, become

unemployed, fall ill, move house, have children or see them leave home, retire, lose loved ones, fall in love, and experience a massive range of other unpredictable developments, shifts and transitions. We therefore have sought to integrate the theme of change through all of the chapters.

In doing this, we have been informed by the 'life analysis' approach which has been developed in social anthropology and the social sciences. This seeks to create accounts based on the context of people's developing lives, entwined with the individual, structural and institutional factors which affect these ongoing narratives. Outlining the area, Shirley Dex has noted that:

Life and work history data...are a recognition of the importance of the overlap in the chronology between individuals' lives and social and institutional structures as well as between related individuals. Both sets of these relationships are important in trying to unravel social life and gain a better understanding of it.

(Dex 1991: 1–2)

On the understanding that 'individuals' lives are the stage on which societal changes are played out' (1991: 2), this approach assumes that through close study of people's everyday lives over time, we will acquire a picture of broader changes in society which are having an impact at the individual level. Life-history analysis postulates that sociological investigations should not simply describe life histories for their own sake; rather, as Paul Bellaby argues,

Cases must be treated as samples of the social: if not probability samples of a defined population drawn to test propositions, then what Glaser and Strauss (1967) call 'theoretical samples', selected to explore the various dimensions of social structure, and to enable theory to be built on evidence.

(1991: 20)

Although we have been cautious about drawing deterministic conclusions based upon our sample who are, by definition, people willing to complete quite lengthy diary-booklets for the BFI three times a year, and who unknowingly presented themselves into the sampling process when they completed a *One Day in the Life of Television* diary back in 1988, we have sought to take on board this general approach of life-history analysis: sociological and conscious of wider contexts, but at the same time fundamentally led by the (changeable) subjectivities of respondents.

We should also mention how we considered people's diaries in relation to the demographic facts which we knew about them. We saw above that Morley had come to recognise the flaws in his assumption, in the *Nationwide* study, that individuals' responses to the material would

be a product of their class and background. Sharing Morley's subsequent reservations, we have rather gone the other way, and to an extent have consciously *avoided* generating supposed 'explanations' of things which people have said by referring to their demographic characteristics or background. This is certainly the case with regard to their occupation and geographical location; we realised at an early stage that talking about extracts of respondent's diaries in terms of their being a 'Somerset farmer', 'London-based journalist' or 'Glasgow factory worker' tended to produce mental stereotypes which any other details about a diarist were just 'pasted' on to, creating a veneer of understanding which is often actually illusory. As a kind of compromise to avoid this, we have generally left out geographical information. Having said that, the age and sex of respondents is made relevant at various points in this book. Geography may well be relevant in some ways too, and the data remains at the BFI for those who want to explore this.

For respondents' occupations, we have generally used the terms which the people themselves provided. This sometimes leads to inconsistent terminology; for example, where the woman in a heterosexual couple did not have paid employment outside the home, she would most often describe herself, in this study, as a 'housewife', whilst a man in the same position would most commonly see himself as 'unemployed'. Rather than imposing our own terms in order to avoid problems such as this, we decided to retain the respondents' own authentic descriptions of their status. Therefore the three women who described their occupation as 'farmer's wife', for example, have not been redesignated as 'female farmer' even though this might seem to be more appropriate, given their own detailed descriptions of the work that they did.

### **The arrangement of this book**

In the following chapter we will begin to discuss the place of television in everyday life: how it is fitted into people's internal schedules, the meaning of different times of the day and week, the planning of viewing, interaction around the television, as well as everyday activities not related to television. Chapter three serves as an illustration of some of these themes, as it focuses on the way in which the watching of news programmes is fitted into people's daily business and affects the shape and character of their everyday lives. In chapter four we consider transitions and change in life before the age of 50, and how these affect television use. As people grow up, change schools, do exams, enter the worlds of work or university or unemployment, and perhaps get married, have children, change jobs, get divorced, and so on, we will see that television viewing varies greatly, both in the amount of time spent and in the meaning and purpose of that viewing. In chapter five we turn to the meanings which television has for individuals, bringing companionship, but also guilt; and giving people a common culture on which to base some social interaction, and identification. In chapter six we discuss how people have fitted TV-related technologies, such as video and satellite TV, into their lives, including how they feel about these facilities, and the creative uses they make of them.



We have devoted all of chapter seven to the retired and elderly audience, since there has been little written about this sector of the population in relation to media consumption, and because the Audience Tracking Study provided a rich seam of information on this group. Again, we explore their tastes and uses of television, and what the medium means to them. In chapter eight, we consider television viewing and preferences in relation to gender, including what women and men feel about gendered representations on TV, as well as the ways in which they watch it. In chapter nine, we examine what the diarists had to say about television violence, which continued to be a reasonably ‘hot’ topic in public discourse during the 1990s, as well as their views on other controversial material, and whether these perceptions changed over time. And finally, chapter ten, the conclusion, pulls together some of the themes which have emerged: time and change, the changing landscape of gender, identity, ‘seduction’ by TV, and reflections on the research process.

### Notes

- 1 Other criticisms of cultivation analysis include its inability to take into account questions of genre and media content, and its assumption that the audience pays full attention to television, which, as we know from this and other studies, is not necessarily the case. For some further criticisms of the way in which cultivation analysis is conducted, see Gauntlett (1995).
- 2 This figure is based on the guess that the letters Ang received may have been on average 400 words long. The BFI Audience Tracking Study, it will be recalled, gathered around three and a half million words from its respondents.
- 3 The BFI sent out diaries in different months, in order to increase the variety in the times at which diaries had been completed and to detect seasonal shifts; similarly, diaries were set for different days of the week.