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Particip@tions Volume 1, Issue 1 (November 2003)

### Introduction: Maintaining a Sense of Wonder

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The first issue of any new journal is always odd. Regardless of all the procedures and statements, it is a strange thing to burst into visibility addressing a public as if it has always already been there. Editorial introductions to new journals are probably even more strange, as they consciously try to manoeuvre between explaining the obvious (we're here! ... come and take a look!), positioning itself within existing debates, and pushing the agenda for future discussions. And then there is the need to explain the title:

*Particip@tions*. Sounds fancy? We are reminded of that legendary opening of the first issue of *Cinéfantastique* in 1970 in which editor Frederick Clarke mockingly explains why the new and 'pretentious' title of his new magazine matters, by saying that it indicates how he wants to tackle horror movies 'with all pretensions intact'.

So do we. We believe audience and reception studies matter and we are prepared to make a fuss about it, up to the choice of the title. We claim they matter a lot to whoever is in media studies, whoever is involved in media policy, in media economics, sociology, psychology, basically to anyone who has any interest in fields of cultural inquiry. They matter because they give room to a basic sense of wonder about the relationships between media and publics. And of course it isn't just a question of the traditional mass media. New digital interactive media. Live events, and performances. Cultural sites and institutions. From naive gaze to jaded glance, senses of wonder have been the start of most (if not all) audience and reception research. It is our aim that *Particip@tions* can give space to academic expressions of that sense of wonder.

But we also believe that just as there need to be specialist places (Journals, conferences, etc) where people can discuss these other components of media studies, so there needs to be a 'place' dedicated to audience research. And especially so in this case. Because any one who has attempted to research audiences knows that such research is particularly complicated and testing. And because we are not trying to reach only those sectors where audience research is already reasonably well established, but also those where it hardly exists at all – theatre and performance studies, for instance – or where it exists in different forms and with rather different purposes – visitor studies in museums, for instance. The necessity for a space dedicated to the complexities and potentials of audience research is, to us, unarguably made.

## Why and What?

This journal does not come out of thin air. It has been in the making for a number of years. Yet we believe this is the right time to launch it. There are a number of reasons for this. First, we believe audience and reception studies needs a platform. Audiences and receptions have been the 'talk of the town' for a number of years now, but have always been lacking a forum in which a proper academic discussion on its premises, methods and results could be formed. Even the many journals and publications that have, rightfully so, made room for audience and reception studies have not yet provided such a continuous platform. It is for this reason that we are giving our readers access, in this first issue, to a debate from an area where audience research *of different kinds* has been heard in the public domain. In 2002 a group of academics came together with other concerned people to draw up a response to a court decision in St Louis, USA, where certain kinds of research had been used as the basis of a decision to ban young people from access to certain kinds of video games. The response, an Amici Brief, played a role in overturning a lower court decision on this. Subsequently, however, that Brief itself became the topic of a debate – and we hope soon to be able to attach one of the responses to it, as a resource for everyone to be able to examine and evaluate, and perhaps use in teaching.

Second, we want to acknowledge the history of audience and reception studies. All audiences are embedded in history, as is all audience and reception research, and we believe it is time to take that into account. This is why we offer in this issue a report on research executed more than three decades ago. The audience research field has been quite prone to position-taking: shedding past skins of theory and research, in search of new approaches. This is unwise, we think. In this first issue we are delighted to have the opportunity to publish the report of a major piece of research which has never before seen publication. Based in the Uses and Gratifications Tradition, this report tells of one of the most ambitious attempts by Jay Blumler, Denis McQuail and J R Brown to complete the arc of their research tradition, and to formulate and test some key research instruments. It seems to us that this is of real importance whether or not we, today, are fully convinced by the framework that Tradition developed. The reach of such a piece of research is in itself of great significance. History informs much of the views we have of audiences and receptions and we believe the past and present should constantly be aware of each other. That is why we see it as an essential part of *Particip@tions* to provide that awareness. Our sections of book reviews, bibliography and archive are constructed to do just that. We have ambitious plans to use this Journal as a focus for a range of other things. If only a portion of those plans come to fruition, we will still be well content.

But *Particip@tions* is not stuck in the past, far from it. Therefore, third, and very topical, we believe it is the right time to launch a journal of audience and reception studies because of the political character of the subject. Audiences and receptions may be private from time to time, but in a large perspective they always exist within the public sphere. So, audience and reception studies should address that public sphere, and show how and why it is

relevant (obviously we believe it is). Across the world, notions of audiences and receptions are used and abused for dozens of reasons: opinion polls are used to start wars, audience testimony is used to send people to jail, and television voting is used to forge media careers. It seems as if the vox populi is all-dominant. *Particip@tions* wants to offer clear views on these uses of audiences, and discuss the underlying agenda's, motives, methods, and implications of this presence. We believe it is our academic duty to investigate political uses of audiences and receptions politically.

And for this and other reasons we are pleased that the first issue of this Journal coincided with the publication of an important new book – by Kim Schrøder and others – on the practices of audience research, to which we devote an extended review. This book, to our eyes, raises some important issues about the relations between methods of research, and the politics of the research process. This, we hope, will become a recurrent discussion in the Journal – but not one on which we think the Journal should have a 'line'. But one of the real virtues of Schrøder et al.'s book is that it is clearly based on a long engagement in the actual practice of audience research. An additional motive for our creating this Journal at this moment is our concern that in recent years there has almost been more debate about the 'idea of the audience' than conduct of actual research. That is a serious weakness, in our view.

Fourth, we believe it is the right time to start this journal as a cross-disciplinary attempt to bring together audience and reception research from a number of disciplines. This can encompass a wide range of media, moving beyond the usual suspects of television and film, and including research on for instance, museum audiences, theatre reception, festival publics, visitor studies, studies of interactive and participative audiences. We believe such a diversity will lead to a refreshing cross-fertilisation between approaches and theories. We have a sense too that in a number of cases the rather hermetic character of academic audience researches may be breaking down. We hear of an increasing number of cases where, from different research traditions, academic researchers are gaining opportunities to contribute their skills and knowledges in public fora. If that is right, then it is surely a good, albeit a risky one – and the stronger the community of researchers, the better for our research.

Exceptional for a first issue, we were lucky enough to be able to choose from a number of fine submissions. The content we are offering then, is not just a selection of whatever was available to us at the time of launch, it is also a conscious construction of what *Particip@tions* can be, wants to be, and will be. All of the materials presented here do, in our eyes, offer that, and we are proud to be able to publish them here and now. We have not rushed to publish submissions which will clearly benefit from having time for revision. As a fully-refereed Journal, we are committed to sustaining high standards of academic enquiry. But after a substantial debate among those who have helped it to come into being, we have also committed ourselves to a rather unusual approach to practices of refereeing. Readers who are interested may like to look at the Page devoted to Rules for Submission and Refereeing Practices.

## How?

A word about the format of *Particip@tions*. We have long debated what form the journal should take, and we have settled on online publication for a number of reasons. One problem that all researchers face is the problem of length. But it is spectacularly a problem in audience research where the evidential bases of people's arguments can often be squeezed to death by space-limitations. As a result, often, paper publication only permits a summarised, distorted version of audience and reception research to be shared with the academic community. This way, research projects in which tons of money and effort have been invested are reduced to sound bites. Much as that is a sad reality, we think it is quite harmful. We believe online publications can help give access to much more detailed considerations of research, and can, crucially, help access the research materials themselves (the raw data, the full quote, the entire interview). Given the importance of the information audiences and materials offer we think we owe them that clarity. André Bazin once famously commented upon the length of one of his essays by saying '*je n'ai pas eu le temps de faire court*', implying that less is more. We would like to turn that around, and say that *Particip@tions* does allow time (and space) for both the catchy sound bite and the elaborate consideration. Both have their place in academic debate. *Particip@tions* is in the enviable position to be able to accept both.

Additional benefits of online publication are that it offers updates (materials can continually be made available), continuous debates (even in between 'volumes' and 'issues'), and a high public visibility (try to Google us). It also allows links with the outside world. Online publication makes it possible to extend the debate beyond the confinements of the journal text. Lastly, on-line publication enables the use of audiovisual aids unreachable for printed materials (high quality pictures, colour posters, moving images, ultimately even sound ... but give us time on that one!).

Readers will note that the Journal has managed to acquire its own web domain. This is a deliberate decision on the part of the Editorial Board. Although the majority of us come from one institution, the Constitution we have adopted requires that the Editorial Board be based in more than one institution. We have done this because we are determined that *Particip@tions* should be seen to be the property of an emerging academic community of audience and reception researchers. At a time when there are many pressures on all of us to 'privatise' research efforts, we hope to contribute something in the other direction.

## You

Finally, but importantly, we know that the title *Particip@tions* brings to mind another meaning, that of actual shared interest and access, of being-part-of-the-discussion. It is our commitment that the format of *Particip@tions* should facilitate this. This is why we choose for an online journal, with full-text free access for all, available for teaching and research training, and with room for open-minded discussions on the role of audience and reception research. Several of the features which are still under construction at the time of this first issue are designed for this purpose. We aim to continually maintain and update

an archive of audience and reception research, including a bibliography and (if possible) access to raw audience and reception data.

Participation means collaboration, and we would therefore like to call upon our readers (isn't this term in itself becoming a fine description of how multi-layered audience and reception studies are becoming?). We would like you to share with us your lists of audience and reception publications, your data, and your materials, so the whole community can benefit from seeing how academics make sense of that wonder that engaging with media is.

To end where we began. A first issue is necessarily a weird one. How can researchers know to submit their work to a Journal that doesn't yet exist? We make no apology for the fact that this first issue is 'light' on new materials. We are already beginning to receive submissions from people active in the field now, and are confident that there is more than enough to make the Journal very soon an essential part of anyone's diet who is interested in this broad field of research and ideas.

Welcome to *Particip@tions*, we hope you agree with us that this is a timely development.

