

## Impact case study (REF3b)

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| <b>Institution:</b> University of Nottingham   |
| <b>Unit of Assessment:</b> 36 Communication, Cultural & Media Studies, Library & Information Management  |
| <b>Title of case study:</b> Supporting Institutional Change Through Targeted Audience Research   |
| <p><b>1. Summary of the impact</b></p> <p>Prof. Roberta Pearson (Professor of Film and Television Studies, Nottingham, 2004-present) and Dr Elizabeth Evans (Lecturer in Film and Television Studies, Nottingham, 2007-present) have produced original audience research to generate greater understanding of viewer engagements with film and television programming in terms of taste, distinction and community. This has been applied in local, national and global contexts, leading to the following changes in institutional policy and the provision of services in the following ways:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ improving access to television programming for a particular community of viewers, i.e. visually impaired audiences, through the Royal National Institute of Blind People's (RNIB) national campaign to raise the quota of Audio Described (AD) television content</li> <li>❖ promoting strategies for increasing revenue and audience retention at the Broadway Cinema and Media Centre and QUAD, independent cinema venues in Nottingham and Derby showing 'specialised' or non-mainstream films, including foreign-language and archive titles</li> <li>❖ increasing commercial opportunities for the Fox Soccer network to internationalize its brand identity by recognising the specific characteristics defining local audience tastes in the highly competitive market for global television sports programming.</li> </ul>  |
| <p><b>2. Underpinning research</b></p> <p>Pearson and Evans have published widely on constructions of taste, distinction and community in relation to both television and cinema audiences (<b>References A, B, C, D and E</b>). They have also undertaken demand-led research for external organisations, the outputs of which have dual status: as academic research outputs through journal articles (<b>References F and G</b>) and as commercial reports that have fed into organisational change for the client. This first type of output is described in this section, the second in section 4, and can be gathered under three thematic foci.</p> <p><b>i) Television Audiences, Taste, Distinction and Community</b></p> <p>Television audiences are the focus of published outputs by both Pearson (<b>Reference E</b>) and Evans (<b>Reference C</b>). <b>Reference E</b> addresses issues of taste and distinction through examining the responses of online fandoms to the television drama <i>Sherlock</i> (BBC, 2010- ). Its original insight lies in positing a distinction between affirmational fandoms that engage in traditional practices of evaluation and transformational fandoms that engage in established fannish practices of textual reworking. <b>Reference C</b> addresses the tastes of television audiences in terms of the values that viewers place upon television drama and transmedia extensions. It offers original insight by focusing on the specific narrative characteristics, such as fictional characters, that are central to engagement with television and by demonstrating the importance of established, familiar viewing practices to audiences in light of potential changes to viewing contexts or the development of new texts. <b>Reference F</b> (based on RNIB commissioned research) is one of only a handful of scholarly works that addresses media consumption by the disabled; it has original insights into the role that television plays in visually impaired peoples' media engagement, their sense of inclusion in the community of television viewers, and their viewing tastes. In particular, the research demonstrates the importance of drama programming and its centrality to television's ability to construct a community, something that was a key part of visually impaired audiences' daily lives. It demonstrates the importance of distinction in examining genre and audience tastes by considering individual genres of programming as having distinctive textual characteristics and values.</p> <p><b>ii) Cinema Audiences, Taste, Distinction and Community</b></p> <p>Research on cinema audiences and specific venues such as those in the independent sector has been published in <b>References A and B</b>. Focused on the example of Nottingham, <b>Reference A</b> (lead author Jancovich was Reader in Film Studies at Nottingham, 1996-2004) is the only extensive cultural history of cinema venues in an English city. The book includes data on contemporary audiences that offer evidence of an association between cinema audiences and community – cinemas as places in which 'people not only knew one another but also looked after one another', and unique evidence of the operation of taste and distinction amongst the Broadway Cinema's audiences. <b>Reference B</b> examines high culture fandoms, communities almost entirely</p> |

neglected by fan studies. Its original insight consists of breaking down the distinctions between high and popular culture fandoms: consumers of high culture resist the fan label, but engage in practices similar to those of popular culture fandoms. This provides a framework for hypothesizing the similarities and differences between the Broadway's audiences and those of the commercial cinema. The article builds on Pearson's previous work on taste and distinction amongst cinema and television audiences undertaken prior to her Nottingham appointment. **Reference G** is based on research commissioned by the PBQ consortium, a network of nineteen East Midlands-based independent cinemas led by the Broadway Cinema in Nottingham. This research investigated audiences at Broadway, along with two other PBQ venues: QUAD in Derby and Phoenix in Leicester. It is distinctive in that it is one of the few scholarly works that investigates contemporary cinema audiences as opposed to contemporary television or historical cinema audiences. It is also original in its focus on the cinema as a social and cultural space, rather than only on the act of film watching or interpretation. It gives original insights into PBQ audiences' tastes and their sense of distinction and of indirect community with like-minded viewers. It revealed new information about the demographic profile of the existing audience; in comparison to the general UK population, PBQ audiences are older and more highly educated. It showed that audiences were very loyal both to the cinema medium and to PBQ venues, preferring them to commercial venues. It revealed that audiences valued the venues for their distinctive programming of content that the cinema sector refers to as 'specialised', i.e. non-mainstream niches for British, U.S. independent and foreign-language films. They also declared their sense of cultural distinction, valuing the venues because of how they perceived themselves as belonging to a community of viewers with shared tastes and appropriate behaviour patterns contrasting with the tastes and behaviour of patrons attending major cinema chains.

### iii) Television Audiences, Taste, Content and Studying Global Audience Communities

**Reference D** examines the continuing importance of U.S. television programming to UK audiences; it demonstrates this by documenting viewers' desire to gain access to this content. This book also explores issues of global distribution and the need for U.S. content producers and broadcasters to acknowledge the specific characteristics of local markets, particularly in terms of how local broadcasters position their content within television schedules. It is original in its consideration of how emerging technologies shape the ways in which audiences engage with globally distributed content. **Reference E** examines the value of emerging digital methodologies for audience research versus more established methods such as focus groups and questionnaires. It argues that the potentially infinite data available on the internet means it is not possible to gather exhaustive and comprehensive audience reception data about even one television programme, but that it is nevertheless possible both to identify key online sites of audience engagement and to generalise about the modes of responses found there. It offers original insights into methodological approaches to study diverse, global television audiences.

### 3. References to the research

- A. Jancovich, M. and Faire, L. with Stubbings, S. *The Place of the Audience: Cultural Geographies of Film Consumption*. London: BFI Publishing, 2003. Available on request. Research for the book was conducted through the project *Film Consumption and the City: A Historical Case Study in the City of Nottingham*, funded by an AHRB major research award of £61,598, 1999-2000. Subsequently a chapter was reprinted in *Movie Blockbusters*, London: Routledge, 2003, pp. 190-201, edited by Nottingham's Stringer.
- B. Pearson, R. 'Bachies, Bardies, Trekkies and Sherlockians'. In J. Gray, C. Sandvoss and C. Lee Harrington, eds, *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*. New York: New York University Press, 2007, pp. 98-109. Available on request. Pearson was invited to contribute to this collection by distinguished editors in the field of fan studies and the book was published by an esteemed American university press.
- C. Evans, E. 'Character, Audience Agency and Transmedia Drama'. *Media, Culture and Society*, 2008, 30(2): 197-213. Submitted to UoA47 in RAE2008. *MCS* is a leading peer-reviewed journal in the field of media studies, ranked 20 out of 72 in Communication and 41 out of 137 in Sociology.
- D. Evans, E. *Transmedia Television: Audiences, New Media and Daily Life*. London: Routledge, 2011. Listed in **REF2**. Published in the prestigious Comedia series.
- E. Pearson, R. 'Good Old Index, or The Mystery of the Infinite Archive'. In: K. Busse and L.

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Stein, eds, *Sherlock and Transmedia Fandom: Essays on the BBC Series*, Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012, pp.150-64. Listed in **REF2**. Reviewed by editors, other contributors and two external reviewers, including leading US television scholar Jason Mittell.

F. Evans, E. and Pearson, P. 'Boxed Out: Visually Impaired Audiences and the Cultural Value of the Television Image'. *Particip@tions: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies* [online], 2009, 6(2), 373-402 [viewed 3 September 2013]. Available from: [www.participations.org/Volume%206/Issue%202/evans.pdf](http://www.participations.org/Volume%206/Issue%202/evans.pdf). *Particip@tions* is the leading international peer reviewed journal of media audience research.

G. Evans, E. 'Superman vs Schrödinger's Cat: Taste, Etiquette and Independent Cinema Audiences as Indirect Communities'. *Particip@tions: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies*, 2011, 8 (2), 327-349 [viewed 3 September 2013]. Available from: [www.participations.org/Volume%208/Issue%202/3c%20Evans.pdf](http://www.participations.org/Volume%208/Issue%202/3c%20Evans.pdf). Listed in **REF2**. *Particip@tions* is the leading international peer reviewed journal of media audience research.

#### 4. Details of the impact

The value and importance placed against the published research of Evans and Pearson was recognized when both researchers were commissioned by the RNIB, PBQ and Fox Soccer to conduct three demand-led audience research projects. Each project responded to specific concerns within these organisations and led to changes in policy and practice towards strategies that were focused on audience needs and desires.

##### i) Research Commissioned by the RNIB: Improving Television for Visually Impaired Audiences

By raising awareness of the value placed by visually impaired audiences on Audio Description (AD) for television dramas and factual programming, research by Evans and Pearson prompted communications regulator Ofcom to increase mandatory AD content from 10% to 20%, producing a material improvement in the media engagement and experience of visually impaired viewers. The RNIB was concerned that visually impaired people were excluded from valuable viewer experiences by the lack of AD programming. Via public relations firm Blue Rubicon, RNIB engaged Evans and Pearson as consultants for its March 2008 campaign, with the aim of persuading Ofcom to raise the mandatory percentage of AD content provided by television broadcasters. RNIB described the research as providing 'an excellent case for increasing the number of programmes that are Audio Described' (**Source A**). While the RNIB had intended to focus their campaign around the need to increase AD for news and current affairs only, Evans and Pearson's research persuaded Blue Rubicon and the RNIB to shift the emphasis towards drama programming as not only requiring more explicit AD provision but also as representing the most important genre for generating a sense of audience community amongst the visually impaired (**Source B**). The research played a central part in the extensive publicity campaign, acting as the foundation for claims concerning the value of television in forming a sense of community amongst visually impaired audiences. In a nationwide press release (**Source C**), the RNIB noted how 'TV plays a pivotal role in the lives of people with sight problems' and acknowledged the research of Evans and Pearson confirmed that 'lack of TV viewing can leave people isolated' and the importance of AD for how 'an additional commentary which describes body language, expressions and movements, making the story clear through sound.... can transform the enjoyment of TV for people who have difficulty seeing what's happening on the screen'. On the research and campaign, the BBC reported (**Source D**): 'Research suggests that most of the 2m people with sight problems in Britain spend time watching television for relaxation and entertainment. The RNIB is encouraging people with sight problems to use the free AD service on digital TV.... research, by the University of Nottingham, found that more than half of those interviewed said they watched dramas and factual programmes. And nearly three-quarters watched TV for five hours or more each week, with 86% saying they would watch more if there were more of the AD service available'.

##### ii) Research Commissioned by the PBQ Consortium: Improving Audience Development Strategies for Independent Cinemas

Independent 'specialised' cinemas face substantial competition for audiences from commercial chains and home cinema technologies. In this context, the PBQ consortium needed a better understanding of current and potential audiences to develop their programming, promotional and audience development strategies in ways that would help the venues address these challenges

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and improve their economic and cultural standing. Aware of research on cinemas in Nottingham conducted by Jancovich, PBQ commissioned audience research from Evans and Pearson. This led to workshops with audience development staff and two reports outlining recommendations for audience development strategies. Broadway's Chief Executive and QUAD's Director of Audience Engagement confirmed (**Sources E and F**) that the research crucially assisted their organizations in three ways. First, the research led Broadway and QUAD to revise their audience development strategies to steer away from plans to broaden the demographic scope of their respective customer bases and towards concentrating instead on growing the existing base of older, more educated, cinema-goers who have traditionally characterized audiences at the venues. Secondly, the research influenced Broadway's decision to extend the employment of their Audience Development Coordinator. The precise value of the research to the organization is acknowledged in the Chief Executive's statement that 'As a result of a better understanding of its audience and its brand, Broadway has been successful in increasing footfall and box office revenues year on year. Compared to the period before the findings of the report were acted upon in 2009/10, cinema tickets sales have increased by 22.5% to more than 190,000 in 2012/13. Whilst the impact of the research isn't the only factor in this impressive increase, it has without a doubt been a major contributory factor' (**Source E**). QUAD similarly reports that 'cinema revenues have increased by 20% and overall attendance by 9%' (**Source F**). Finally, both organizations have become part of the British Film Institute's UK Film Audience Network, an initiative launched as part of the BFI's *Film Forever* plan. Broadway was recently successful in becoming the Lead Organisation for the Film Hub Central East and QUAD is a steering group member. A key objective of this initiative is to expand audiences for specialised film, and in this context the Chief Executive and Director of Audience Engagement cite the value of maintaining an on-going relationship with the Department of Culture, Film and Media in helping them to meet current and future goals (**Sources E and F**).

### iii) Research Commissioned by Fox Soccer: Improving Local Strategies in Global Television Sports Broadcasting

Research conducted for Fox Soccer informed a clearer understanding of television audience taste that improves the sports channel's operational decision-making by raising the profile of local conditions and preferences in terms of content, distribution and marketing outside of the U.S. (**Source G**). When the research was commissioned, the U.S.-based channel was intending to expand its position within the global football television market through a behind-the-scenes documentary series on Liverpool Football Club, *Being: Liverpool*. Working at a significant cultural and geographical distance from their documentary's subject and the economically important European football market, Fox commissioned a team at Nottingham to prepare a report evaluating whether they could successfully apply the format to similar programming in the future. Evans led the team (Grainge, Johnson, McDonald, Pearson, Sergi) in researching this report, which reinforced the value of the *Being: Liverpool* format and its potential for further development, while also revealing the limitations of the format. As a result, the research informed Fox Soccer's future global strategy in the following ways:

- ❖ recognising how the stylistic presentation of U.S. produced content, especially documentary, influenced audience perceptions of 'Americanisation' in globally distributed programming
- ❖ understanding specific characteristics of local television markets and institutions in order to match their brand profile with national audience tastes and the identity of local broadcasters.

At Fox Soccer, the General Manager and Executive Vice President commented that the research has 'highlighted how we... needed to understand our global markets in more detail... As a result of this report we have implemented changes in the way we assess the nature of quality of information that needs gathering prior to the release of a new product on the international market' (**Source G**).

### 5. Sources to corroborate the impact

Source A - E-mail, Blue Rubicon, 'RNIB Research'

Source B - E-mail, Blue Rubicon, 'Re-RNIB Research'

Source C - Press release, RNIB, 'RNIB research reveals that TV is good for you'

Source D - Online article, BBC News, 'TV "is important to blind people"'

Source E - Letter, Chief Executive, Broadway

Source F - Letter, Director of Audience Engagement, QUAD

Source G - Letter, General Manager and Executive Vice President, Fox Soccer