The Accidental Audience:

Industrial Management of Unexpected Television Viewerships

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Abstract

The Accidental Audience considers how media organizations construct and respond to audience members that are not part of the intended audience for a particular media product. Focusing on public service and commercial children's television, this thesis explores how the increasing reliance on audience research and audience profiling, generating ideas of a constructed *intended* audience, can often oversimplify the unpredictable, messy and complex reality of television audiences.

This thesis draws on critical work about industry conceptions of media audiences, notably the work of Philip Napoli, to develop a framework for conceptualizing the accidental audience. This focuses on the discrepancy between *intended* and *actual* audiences in the form of unexpected viewerships for (children's) television programmes. Examining the television industry's conceptualisation of audiences through the development of the TV ratings system, this thesis considers a series of case studies which introduce and utilise the model of the accidental audience. Specifically this thesis examines adult audiences of programming created for children, including the Brony audience (men aged 18-45) of *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* (2010-), the student audience of *Teletubbies* (1997-2001), and the non-parent audience of *Sesame Street* (1969-). In critical terms, this thesis explores how the television industry has responded in different ways to accidental audiences and examines the strategies used by the television industry to manage these audiences.

My focus is on the dynamic relation between studios/networks and accidental audiences and how media industries navigate unexpected audience constituencies, and the overall aim of the project is to advance knowledge of the negotiations that take place between screen industries and audiences.

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Table of Contents

Introduction 8

Chapter 1: Construction the Intended Audience: Finding, Knowing and Analysing the Television Audience 25

Chapter 2: Framing the Accidental Audience 74

Chapter 3: My Little Absorbed Audience: Bronies, Hasbro and Friendship is Magic 108

Chapter 4: The Denied Audience: Negotiating the Accidental Audience of Teletubbies and the BBC 177

Chapter 5: Can you tell me how to get to the Accidental Audience of Sesame Street?: Navigating Public Service and Commercial Tensions 231

Conclusion 292

Bibliography 307

Table of Figures

Fig 1	The Audience Marketplace	78
Fig 2	The Position of the Accidental Audience	99
Fig 3	The Positioning of the Absorbed Audience	101
Fig 4	The Positioning of the Denied Audience	102
Fig 5	The Accidental Audience Framework	104
Fig 6	Drawing of a My Pretty Pony from the original patent application	115
Fig 7	Generation 1 Unicorn Pony	116
Fig 8	Generation 1 Happy Meal Toys	118
Fig 9	My Little Pony: The Movie film poster	119
Fig 10	Generation 2 Pony	120
Fig 11	Generation 2 Video Game	121
Fig 12	Generation 3 Rainbow Dash	122
Fig 13	MLP:FIM cover and Generation 3's Dancing in the Clouds DVD cover	128
Fig 14	Graph depicting posts per day in Brony threads on 4Chan	135
Fig 15	Post uploaded to 4chan	137
Fig 16	Meme used during the 'pony wars'	138
Fig 17	Graph depicting who Bronies had introduced the programme to	142
Fig 18	Graph depicting how Bronies were introduced to *MLP:FIM*	142
Fig 19	Brony T-shirt for sale at the 2011 Comic-Con	161
Fig 20	Billboards promoting season 2 of MLP:FIM	165
Fig 21	Derpy Hooves' first appearance and subsequent design	167
Fig 22	The Comic-Con 2011 poster	169
Fig 23	The Teletubby Characters	192
Fig 24	Teletubbyland	195
Fig 25	Tinky Winky and his controversial red bag	204
Fig 26	The Sesame Street set	241
Fig 27	James Earl Jones Counting to 10 in 1969	245
Fig 28	Jim Henson with the main cast of Sam and Friends	249
Fig 29	Wontkins about the be shot for disliking Wilkins Coffee	250
Fig 30	Rowlf and Jimmy Dean	252
Fig 31	TV Guide Advert featuring Connie Stevens and the Muppets	259
Fig 32	The Land of Gorch characters	267
Fig 33	Alastair Cookie in Monsterpiece Theatre	271
Fig 34	Me, Claudius title screen	272
Fig 35	I, Claudius title screen	272
Fig 36	Screen shots from Crumbly Pictures Presents	274
Fig 37	Big Bird reading a tweet	283
Fig 38	Bert and Ernie with Nita Lowey at Capitol Hill	287

Introduction

This thesis explores the conceptualisation, formulation and management of unexpected television viewerships. It engages with a previously unexplored feature of the television industry, namely the reaction of the television industry to, and the strategies it uses to manage, the unexpected audiences that form around its programming. These unexpected television viewerships will be conceptualised through the framework of, what I term in this thesis, the 'accidental audience'. The framework of the accidental audience is developed from Philip Napoli's concept of *The Audience Marketplace*, where the media audience is conceptualised "as a representation of consumer attention to advertising messages".[1] Napoli complicates the television industry's methods for creating programming for specific, intended audiences by theorising the predicted audience (the audience the industry expects will engage and watch a programme),[2] the measured audience (the audience constructed using the ratings system), and the actual audience (the audience that really engages with a programme). The aspect of Napoli's work most integral to this thesis is the idea that there can be members of the actual audience who are not part of the predicted audience of a television programme. The framework of the accidental audience explores these moments when the intended and actual audiences of a television programme differ. The thesis then examines the

[1] Philip M. Napoli, *Audience Economics: Media Institutions and the Audience Marketplace* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 23.

[2] The terms 'intended audience', 'target audience', and 'predicted audience' are commonly used interchangeably across academia and the television industry. Within this thesis I will use the term 'intended audience', and use the term 'predicted' when discussing Napoli's model.

varying responses of the television industry to this phenomenon, including attempts to deny or absorb these accidental audiences. Critically, this thesis will consider cases where the accidental audience is viewed as either an opportunity (an audience to be absorbed), or a threat (an audience to be denied).

In order to unpack the nested issues within this theoretical framework this thesis posits three research questions:

1) How does the television industry react to audiences it did not expect to form around its programmes?

2) What specific strategies are developed and used by the television industry to manage these audiences?

3) How does the cultural and industrial context of the programme shape those management strategies?

To answer these questions, this thesis will apply the accidental audience framework to three case studies, which explore the key issues within the research questions. Each case study forms its own chapter, and each will begin by establishing the intended audience and production context of the programme, before exploring the emergence and evolution of the accidental audience around that programme. Finally, they will examine the industry's reaction to the accidental audience, considering how, and by what means, the accidental audience was transformed into an absorbed or a denied audience.

Each case study is therefore able to trace the life of an accidental audience and examine how it was managed by the television industry.

In critical and methodological terms, this thesis is situated within the field of media industry studies.[3] Specifically, it intersects two debates within this field: industrial conceptualisations of audiences and the media management of audiences. In order to answer how the television industry reacts to audiences it did not expect to form around its programmes, this thesis must first outline how the television industry conceptualises its audience and how this manifests in the creation of the intended audience. Kristyn Gorton argues that the television industry uses methods such as the ratings system to construct the television audience as a static number, which enforces the notion that "audiences [are] fixed and controllable."[4] Conversely, Peter Dahlgren has argued that "'audiences' are always at least in part discursive constructs, shaped by specific institutional needs and discursive domains".[5] Dahlgren reflects the idea that there are differing constructions of 'the audience' emerging from different discursive fields, meaning that audiences are subjectively defined and considered, rather than existing as a universally

[3] While this thesis deals with questions and discourses around audiences and audience behaviours, it focuses on how the mechanisms of content management and brand engagement respond to audiences and behaviours. The audiences themselves, while important, are not the primary impetus behind this thesis. Situating this research within audience studies exists just beyond the intended scope of this research, but has value as a complementary follow-on study. Instead, this thesis deals with industrial conceptions of audiences and therefore utilizes a media industries approach to audiences.

[4] Kristyn Gorton, *Media Audiences: Television, Meaning and Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 11.

[5] Peter Dahlgren, "Critique: Elusive Audiences," in *Approaches to Audiences: A Reader*, ed. R. Dickinson, R. Harindranath, and O. Linne (London: Arnold, 1998), 307.

accepted concept. Ien Ang has written extensively about the constructed audience and argues that the television audience is inherently unstable and "a continually changing, dynamic object that always seems to elude definitive description."[6] Ang argues that television audiences are in a constant, dynamic state of flux, and that "the control made possible by audience measurement is inevitably precarious and provisional."[7] It becomes evident that scholars have challenged the ratings system and its reliance on fixed and knowable numbers to construct the audience. This suggests that there is a discrepancy between the increasingly rational industrial concept of the television audience and the unpredictable constitution of actual audiences. The accidental audience framework intervenes in these moments and offers a way to help understand audiences that do not fit into the industry's conceptualisation and the television industry's relationship with these audiences.

However accidental audiences can be constructed as well. Viewers outside of the predicted audience of a programme can be seen by the television industry and the news media and grouped together to become an accidental audience, and assigned behaviours and activities that may not accurately apply to all the viewers within that group. This means that the accidental audience, and the audience behaviours they engage in, may be exaggerated with news and industrial discourses. Often it is these exaggerated behaviours, or the public perception of this audience, that cause the television industry concern.

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[6] Ien Ang, *Desperately Seeking the Audience* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 61.
[7] Ibid., 8.

Because of this, this thesis will engage with who constructs the accidental audience, and how the constructed accidental audience needs managing rather than the actual accidental audience.

In order to answer this thesis's second research question - what specific strategies are developed and used by the television industry to manage accidental audiences? - this thesis engages with cultural studies of media management. Derek Kompare, Derek Johnson, and Avi Santo describe media industry management as "a culture of shifting discourses, dispositions, and tactics that create meaning, generate value, organize, or otherwise shape media work throughout each moment of production and consumption." [8] According to this definition, media management encompasses a wide array of activities, from production to marketing, networking, workplace cultures, and brand management. In this thesis I am concerned specifically with the television industry's management strategies for both its audiences and brands, and the discourses and tactics that influence and carry out these specific forms of media management.

There is a precedent for research of this nature. For example, Elizabeth Evans has discussed the BBC's use of Twitter to "manage both audiences and its own brand image",[9] and she specifically states that the BBC uses management to

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[8] Derek Johnson, Derek Kompare, and Avi Santo, *Making Media Work: Cultures of Management in the Entertainment Industries* (New York: New York Univeristy Press, 2014). 2

[9] Elizabeth Evans, "Tweeting on the BBC: Audience and Brand Management Via Third Party Websites," in *Making Media Work: Cultures of Management in the Entertainment Industries*, ed. Derek Johnson, Derek Kompare, and Avi Santo (New York: New York University Press, 2014). 16

"shape audience behaviour".[10] Evans also explores how the management of both brands and audiences can be intertwined,[11] writing that

> If your audience's knowledge and opinion, good or bad, could suddenly be available for anyone to see, then managing these audiences and their opinion becomes not just a case of maintaining loyalty from that individual audience member but also maintaining a broader brand image.[12]

Audience management and brand management are thus intertwined, as both deal with managing the conversations around a property.[13] Branding is further described by Catherine Johnson as a method of "communicating shared values between producer, product and consumer". She suggests that branding has emerged as "a means of managing the complex relationships between the consumer, the product purchased and the producer (and sometimes retailer) of that product".[14] This definition highlights the importance of the relationship between the consumer (the audience) and the producer (the television industry). Television companies have intended audiences for their programmes, and therefore brand those programmes in a way that communicates appropriate values for that intended audience. When an accidental audience consumes the programme instead, those values may not

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[10] Ibid. 238

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Johnson, Kompare, and Santo, *Making Media Work: Cultures of Management in the Entertainment Industries*, 236.

[14] Catherine Johnson, *Branding Television* (London: Routledge, 2012), 13.

be communicated as intended, and the brand image of the programme might be misinterpreted. When the appropriate brand image of a programme is threatened, the brand, and by extension the audience, needs to be managed.

As a result of the emphasis on brand management and audience engagement, this thesis furthers two key areas of media industry studies and opens up the concept of the audience as a shaped asset of a media production. This thesis is, therefore, situated within the field of media industries studies, with a particular focus on how the television industry manages its relationships with audiences. Returning to Johnson et al.'s definition of media management, as "a culture of shifting discourses, dispositions, and tactics",[15] this thesis will argue that the accidental audience framework adds to the field of media management by hypothesising how the industry tends towards one of two dispositions, in that they are either disposed to view the accidental audience as a threat or an opportunity. This is influenced by, and results in, discourses forming around both the programme and the accidental audience that either form part of the tactics and strategies used by the television industry in particular moments to manage its accidental audience, or discourses that need managing themselves in an attempt to control the brand of its television programmes.

One of the most visible aspects of audience management is the management of fans, as demonstrated by Candace Moore and Matt Hills. Moore has written

[15] Johnson, Kompare, and Santo, *Making Media Work: Cultures of Management in the Entertainment Industries*, 2.

about Showtime organising in-person meet-ups and advanced screenings with fans of *The L-Word* (2004-2009) in order to gauge audience interest and "data-mine" [16] them for useful insights. Hills, in turn, has discussed the idea of 'fanagement', which he describes as:

> The attempted management of fan readings, responses and activities… [Which] protects brand value by responding to fan criticism regarding continuity errors, and anticipating possible fan critiques. It also engages in retro-storytelling fan service by addressing fans who have vocally opposed brand developments…while seeking to draw a line under fan resistance by proffering transmedia closure.[17]

While Hills' term is related to other media industry management strategies, he focuses on the use of media tie-ins to respond to fan criticisms, and 'fanagement' focuses on appeasing and influencing the opinions and actions of fans of a particular programme. However, there is a difference between audience management and fan management, as 'fanagement' is about facilitating a more direct relationship between production staff and specific fan groups (through the use of dialogue with them, organising events, and privileging some fan with access as Moore examines). Audience management, in contrast, is less focussed on relationships with specific individuals or groups,

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[16] Vicki Mayer, Miranda J. Banks, and John. T. Caldwell, *Production Studies: Cultural Studies of Media Industries* (Florence: Taylor and Francis, 2009), 244.

[17] Matt Hills, "Torchwood's Trans-Transmedia: Media Tie-Ins and Brand 'Fanagement'," *Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies* 9, no. 2 (2012): 425.

and focuses more on management of larger audience groups who are potentially less active in their engagement with a programme.[18] Within this thesis I will examine a number of accidental audiences, some of which contain fans and draw on fan studies, but others do not contain fans. So, while this thesis is concerned with fans, they are not the focus of this study, and the framework of the accidental audience is constructed to help understand how the television industry can respond to and manage audiences, not just fan groups.

Management strategies are, therefore, the tactics used by the television industry to ensure accidental audiences do not interfere with the brand identity of a programme. By exploring the strategies employed by the television industry to manage its relationships with audiences, and the importance of protecting a brand, this thesis will examine the existence of "accidental audiences", the television industry's disposition towards them, and the discourses and tactics used to officiate them.

[18] The management of fandoms and management of audiences are interrelated but also separate, and this thesis will look at examples of both across the three case studies it engages with. Ultimately, this thesis is concerned with how the television industry manages its audiences, not its fans, because while some accidental audiences may have fans in them, not all members of an accidental audience are necessarily fans.

Methodology

Methodologically, this thesis utilises three case studies to explain and explore some of the ways the television industry has reacted to, and sought to manage, an accidental audience. As a means of focusing concerns, I explore unexpected television viewerships in relation to a specific area: children's television programming.[19] Children's programming is demarcated from other genres of television by addressing a very specific audience niche; it is often positioned within specific programming structures and time slots, and has moved (or been "ghettoized" [20]) onto specific channels. This results in a clear distinction between programming intended for adults and non-child audiences, and programming intended for children. Children's television programming is also examined in terms of the public service responsibilities and educational obligations of networks and channels, especially within public service contexts but also within commercial contexts. Accordingly, children's programming is often discussed in terms of its social and pedagogic value, as parents must be assured that the programming is suitable for their children to consume. Children's programmes, accordingly, have carefully constructed brand

[19] This thesis does not mean to suggest that accidental audiences are limited to children's television, and in the conclusion a number of examples from beyond this genre will be briefly explored, but by defining the scope of this thesis to children's television it is able to clearly introduce and establish the framework without engaging with a multitude of other discourses that could confuse, or muddle, the main argument.

[20] The term 'ghettoized' has been used by multiple academics to describe the separation of children's television from 'other' television. See Ellen Seiter, *The Internet Playground: Children's Access, Entertainment, and Mis-Education*, (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2005), 98. ; Stephen Kline, *Out of the Garden: Toys, TV, and Children's Culture in the Age of Marketing*, (London: Verso, 1995), 73.; Gary Cross, *The Cute and the Cool: Wondrous Innocence and Modern American Children's Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 148.

identities and a specific *intended audience*. When an accidental adult audience forms around a programme intended for a child audience, the television industry must manage this adult audience to ensure the brand identity of the programme remains favourable.[21] Since the demarcation of the intended audiences of children's programming is often clearly established by the television industry, the examples of accidental audiences are often pronounced. The strategies and discourses employed by the television industry in response can, consequently, be more easily identified, and are effective to use when establishing and explaining the framework of the accidental audience.

In order to address the third research question of this thesis - how does the context of programmes shape the strategies that are used by the television industry? - each case study addressed is situated within a differing production context. The first case study was produced within a commercial US context (*My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic,* 2010- made by Hasbro), the second produced within a UK public service context (*Teletubbies,* 1997-2001 made by Ragdoll for the BBC), and the final emerging from a US public service context (*Sesame Street*, 1969-originally broadcast on PBS). The rationale to utilise examples from both US and UK television is due to the fact that these two televisual

[21] The strategy of co-viewing, when a parent watches a programme alongside an appropriately aged child is explored in each case study, but this thesis is concerned with the non-parent adult audience, when the adult watching the programme is not the parent of an intended audience member.

environments share similarities[22] while having key differences in terms of industry structure and governmental policy around (children's) television. By using examples from within commercial US television, and public service television from both the UK and the US, this thesis can explore different strategies used to manage accidental audiences; specifically, the choice of case studies offers a platform to examine absorbed and denied audience as management strategies.

In order to fully explore the case studies within the scope of this thesis, each case study will utilise discursive materials as evidence. While media industries studies often includes empirical evidence, such as interviews with industry personnel, this thesis draws on discursive materials available to the public, because these often shape the relationship between the television industry and its audience. Materials such as newspaper articles, online news articles, trade materials, trailers, advertisements, social media accounts, fan websites, academic articles, press releases, and interviews in trade and popular press,[23] often constitute a significant part of the management strategy, and highlight how the industry was reacting to an accidental audience. These materials are also useful because, as Leora Hadas-Dattner notes in reflecting on her own study of the marketing of auteurs, within media management "the audience is

[22] For example they can share the same language, actors, and providers. For more details see Jonathan Gray and Amanda D. Lotz, *Television Studies*, (New Jersey: John Wiley and Sons, 2012), 5.

[23] Although the specific materials will vary in each case study, dependant on the context of the case study. For example, Chapter 5 deals with a programme that began airing in 1969, and therefore utilises newspaper articles, while Chapter 3 examines a programme that launched in 2010 and relies more heavily on online media.

exposed not to plans but to execution".[24] She continues that in "studying what ideas the media industries communicate to their audiences…it seemed necessary and even crucial to concentrate on those spaces where those ideas were indeed communicated."[25] As this thesis is concerned with how the television industry manages its audiences, engagement with spaces where the audience is managed, and how these processes are communicated to audiences is important. Publically available discursive materials constitute the manifest representation of the television industry's management strategies, and are the visible workings of the television industry. It is through these discourses that the industrial response to an accidental audience can be identified, and its strategies and reasoning interrogated.

Chapter Structure

In developing the concept of the "accidental audience", and exploring its manifestation within the television industry, it is necessary to first establish how the conceptualisation of the television audience results in the intended audience of a television programme. Chapter One, therefore, explores how, historically, the television industry has constructed its audience through the development and implementation of the ratings system. Beginning in the late 1920s, this chapter explores how technological and industrial developments

[24] Leora Hadas-Dattner, "Selling Genius: Promotional Authorship in the Contemporary United States Media Industries" (University of Nottingham PhD Thesis, 2015), 18-19.
[25] Ibid., 18.

have affected the construction and conceptualisation of the audience, and how the television industry has sought to *find, know,* and *analyse* the television audience. By historically tracing the development of the television ratings industry, it demonstrates how and why the television industry has come to construct the television audience numerically as an audience share.[26] This construction process has resulted in the television industry believing they can predict who the audience of a programme will be, and using that data to create the intended audience.[27] This chapter establishes how and why the television industry has conceptualised intended audiences for its programming, establishing a basis for examining accidental viewerships that problematize the notion of an expected audience.

Chapter Two complicates the construction of the television audience and the quantitative conceptualisation used by the ratings industry. Using Napoli's model of *The Audience Marketplace*, it explores the discrepancy between predicted, measured and actual audiences of television programming, and then continues to interrogate the concept of the actual audience in detail. The framework of the accidental audience is introduced as a method to organise and understand the complex reality of the actual television audience. The accidental audience framework operates on the assumption that audiences are complex and unpredictable. This unpredictability however, can be responded

[26] Gorton, *Media Audiences: Television, Meaning and Emotion*.

[27] Semiotically there is a difference in these terms, as you can predict something will happen without intending it to happen. The predicted audience is constructed using data gathered from television ratings to create trends, and the intended audience is who the programme was created for.

to and may potentially come to form part of a brand management strategy. The television industry can use management strategies and tactics to transform the accidental audience into an absorbed audience if it is perceived as an opportunity, or transform the accidental audience into a denied audience if it is perceived as a threat.

Having established the historical means of identifying intended audiences, and highlighting key strategies and discourses surrounding accidental audiences, Chapters Three, Four and Five evidence these theoretical concepts through the application of the framework to specific case studies. Chapter Three, the first of the case study chapters, examines the Brony audience (men typically aged between 18 and 45) of the Hasbro programme *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* (2010-). Bronies are the first case study of this thesis because they offer a pronounced, recent example of an accidental audience that received attention from the news media, and therefore are well documented and information about them is easily accessible. The exploration of key discourses and strategies concerning the Brony audience enables this thesis to consider an example of when the television industry reacted to an accidental audience favourably, incorporating them into the intended audience of the programme, and thereby transforming them into an absorbed audience. This chapter also engages with debates surrounding fandom and the role the internet has in facilitating the agency of accidental audiences, as these factors constitute an important aspect of the context surrounding the formation and management of the Brony audience. It introduces the idea that the news media's

construction of an accidental audience plays a crucial role in the perception of said audience by both the television industry and the wider public. This affects the discourses that arise around the audience and effects the television industry's disposition towards them. This chapter will argue that the news media is instrumental in the process of transforming an accidental audience into either an absorbed or denied audience.

The second case study chapter, Chapter Four, acts as counterpoint to the analysis of the absorbed Brony audience. It focuses on the student accidental audience of *Teletubbies* (1997-2001), which emerged out of a UK public service context. In this instance the accidental audience was perceived as a threat to the programme's brand image by the BBC, so the BBC tried to discourage this audience from engaging with *Teletubbies.* This resulted in this accidental audience being transformed into a denied audience. This chapter explores how within a public service environment, the brand identity and public trust in a programme can be more important than the possible benefits that would result from absorbing the accidental audience. Developing and expanding upon the role of the media in the perception and management of accidental audiences, it highlights the influence of the news media's representation of the accidental audience, and explores the idea that accidental audiences can be constructed through news media attention, and how it can be that the audience constructed in the news media is the audience that needs managing, rather than the accidental audience itself.

The final case study, Chapter Five, blends the public service and commercial contexts explored in the previous two chapters together, as it is concerned with the non-parent adult audience of *Sesame Street* (1969-). This programme emerged out of a joint venture between the public service Children's Television Workshop (CTW) and Jim Henson, whose background was in commercial television. This chapter accordingly navigates the tensions that this context caused when an accidental audience formed around the programme. Due to the longevity of this programme this case study also offers an example of a pre-digital accidental audience, and demonstrates the flexibility within the accidental audience framework as the management strategies used by the Children's Television Workshop (CTW) change with the evolution of the television landscape.

Both the composition and actions of audiences are complex and unpredictable. Despite the television industry refining the technology used to develop audience ratings, the audience of television programmes remains inherently uncertain. In instances when the intended and actual audiences of programmes differ, the television industry may mobilize media management strategies in an attempt to manage and respond to these accidental audiences, and protect their brand. The thesis posits and evidences the key concept of the accidental audience, which is illustrated through the exploration of children's programming as a case study. The thesis thereby provides a detailed exploration of the way that the television industry has deployed particular

management strategies in moments when the actual audience of its programming has differed from the intended audience.

Chapter One

Constructing the Intended Audience: Finding, Knowing and Analysing the Television Audience

The accidental audience consists of viewers that are not part of the intended audience of a programme. As this thesis is concerned with the television industry's management of this accidental audience, it is imperative that it first establishes the television industry's understanding and conceptualisation of its intended audience, as this will impact how it responds to, and manages, the accidental audiences of its programming. By examining how much value the television industry places on the intended audience, it becomes apparent in later chapters why an accidental audience can cause the television industry considerable anxiety and why they need to be managed.

In order to understand how these unexpected viewers affect the television industry, we must first understand how intended audiences are conceptualised, and how accidental audiences fit (or do not fit) into the television industry's construction of the television audience. Ien Ang notes that "audience measurement tends to become a practice in search of its object rather than a practice researching a given object."[28] Ang suggests that the television industry uses audience measurement as a method of finding the television audience, and that the aim of practices such as audience ratings is to help discover, and therefore construct, the television audience. By

[28] Ang, *Desperately Seeking the Audience*, 97.

understanding the industrial construction of the intended television audience, and how the television industry conceptualises and categorises the audience into ratings numbers and demographics through audience measurement, we can see how this construction of the audience relies on ideas of rationality and predictability. The aim of this chapter is, therefore, to examine the television industry's conception of the intended audience by examining how differing audience measurement methodologies, technologies and techniques affected the industrial construction of the television audience at key historical moments[29]. It will argue that these audience measurement strategies resulted in the television industry believing they could predict the audience that a certain programme would appeal to, and therefore create programmes that would attract an intended audience. Programming strategies also play an important role in the construction of the intended audience. Ratings and audience measurement provide the television industry the data necessary for them to conceptualise the audience, and the industry then utilises programming strategies to reinforce this conceptualisation. This chapter will engage with examining not only what devices and methods have been utilised to measure audiences, but how programming strategies have worked to strengthen the industry's construction of the television audience.

[29] For a more comprehensive historical overview of the US ratings system see: Karen Buzzard, *Tracking the Audience: The Ratings Industry From analog to Digital* (London: Routledge, 2012). Jerome Bourdon and Cecile Méadel, *Television Audiences across the World: Deconstructing the Ratings Machine* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014). and Marc Balnaves, Tom O'Regan, and Ben Goldsmith, *Rating the Audience: The Business of Media*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2011).

Traditionally the US television industry has constructed its audience utilising the ratings system, largely due to commercial impulses. The ratings system allowed the commercial television industry to assign a television programme a single number relating to its popularity, so it could be easily sold to advertisers and sponsors based on its commercial potential. Simply put, the larger the number, the more people are exposed to the advert, the more broadcasters can charge for advertisements during that timeslot. Over time audience value has changed, as demographic, and later psychographic, composition of audiences became increasingly important. As both audience research technologies and audience viewing technologies have advanced, advertising agencies have demanded more information about, and in-depth analysis of, the television audience. This chapter will trace the development of how the television industry and advertisers have evolved from trying to *find* out how large their audience is, to trying to *know* who their audience consists of, and how they are now trying to *analyse* their audience's tastes and behaviours in order to develop strategies to monetise them more effectively. These terms are schematic, but this structure is useful in mapping the evolution of how the television industry has constructed its audience. It will allow me to track the television industry's knowledge and how, as technologies have developed, the methods used by audience ratings companies have become more nuanced. It will highlight how the ratings system has technologically advanced and developed as the television marketplace and environment changed, and how the intended audiences of television programmes have become increasingly specific and niche due to these advancements.

As stated in my introduction this thesis will include case studies from both US and UK television. Audience measurement has historically played a different role in the US and the UK due to their differing contexts. As stated earlier, the US used ratings to sell audiences to advertisers. In the UK the first television channel was public service, and therefore did not need to sell their audience[30]. Rather than focussing on audience size, early audience research in the UK was focussed on audience reactions to, and appreciation of, programmes[31], in order to justify the license fee. Once the commercial channel ITV was established in 1955 the UK started to develop a numerical based rating system more similar to the ratings system used in the US, in order to judge the popularity of ITV and sell to advertisers. Although the US and UK ratings systems differed significantly, in methodology and aim ratings in the UK and US do have fundamental similarities, and both systems have evolved from finding, to knowing, and then analysing their audiences

Mark Rogers' model of TV I, TV II and TV III offers an insightful schematic to map the technological developments that took place within the ratings industry. There are three main models, developed by Timothy Todreas[32], John

[30] For a more direct comparison of contemporary US and UK rating systems see: David Marc, *Demographic Vistas: Television in American Culture* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996); Marc Balnaves, "Still the British Model?: The Barb Versus Nielsen," in *Television Audiences across the World: Deconstructing the Ratings Machine*, ed. Jérôme Bourdon and Cécile Méadel (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

[31] Bourdon and Méadel, *Television Audiences across the World: Deconstructing the Ratings Machine*, 35.

[32] Timothy M. Todreas, *Value Creation and Branding in Television's Digital Age* (California: Quorum Books, 1999).

Ellis[33] and Mark Rogers[34], that propose a three part periodization as a method of organising and understanding television history, based on technological, industrial, social and cultural factors. My examination of how the television industry has tried to find, know and analyse audiences can be mapped onto this three period model, with ratings trying to *find* the audience in TV I, *know* the audience in TV II, and *analyse* the audience in TV III. Todreas refers to the eras in terms of their main method of distribution technology, naming them the Broadcast Era, Cable Era and the Digital Era; while Ellis refers to them based on access, naming them the Ages of Scarcity, Availability and Plenty. Both of these scholars tie their terms to a specific industrial and technological developments (such as the introduction of satellite/cable television, and the internet). Rather than tying my exploration of finding, knowing and analysing to a term with specific connotations I will instead utilise Rogers et al's capacious terminology. He does not refer to any specific sector or technology within the eras, instead referring to the ages as TV I, TV II and TV III. These terms do not directly tie any age with a specific trait or technological focus, which affords them a greater level of flexibility. Although Rogers uses his model to refer to the US televisual landscape, by not tying each era to a specific event or technology, his model is flexible enough to also apply to the development of UK television. TV I refers to the first era of television, from the 1950s to the mid-1970s. This era is characterised by the adaptation of methods designed to

[33] John Ellis, *Seeing Things: Television in the Age of Uncertainty* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2000).
[34] Mark C. Rogers, Michael Epstein, and Jimmie L. Reeves, "The Sopranos as Hbo Brand Equity: The Art of Commerce in the Age of Digital Reproduction," in *This Thing of Ours: Investigating the Sopranos*, ed. David Lavery (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 2002).

measure the radio audience for the then-new medium of television. In the US it also maps onto the oligopoly of NBC, CBS, and ABC, and in the UK it maps onto the monopoly and duopoly of the BBC and ITV. TV II then takes place from the mid-1970s to the mid-1990s, a time characterised by the multi-channel televisual environment, cable and satellite television, and technological developments such as the VCR. TV III then spans from the mid-1990s to the present, encompassing the rise of digital distribution methods and the convergence of television and the internet.

However, as Roberta Pearson writes, "we must be aware of the dangers of a teleological perspective that posits a linear historical process with clear demarcations between eras."[35] The television eras are not mutually exclusive, with definitive beginnings and ends that isolate the qualifiers and strategies that define each era from the next. Instead, each era is a mix of new technologies, techniques and contexts alongside developments of existing technologies, techniques and contexts from earlier eras. This condition remains true as long as the requisites for a particular era do not cease to exist. Nonetheless, these eras are useful for situating discourses and audiences within particular industrial contexts. This chapter will use these periods of television history to locate how the television industry's construction of its audience has changed in conjunction with the advances in how the ratings

[35] Roberta Pearson, "Cult Television as Digital Television's Cutting Edge," in *Television as Digital Media* ed. James Bennett and Niki Strange (London: Duke University, 2011), 107.

system collects data about the television audience, while acknowledging that these eras do not exist in isolation of each other.

In demonstrating that the television industry conceptualises its audiences through numerical means, this chapter will establish how this audience measurement has resulted in the television industry believing they can predict the audiences of their programmes, and create specific programmes that will attract intended audiences. Chapter Two will then complicate the idea of audiences being predictable, and demonstrate the gaps in the industry's understanding, which is where the concept of the accidental audience emerges from.

Finding the Broadcast Audience Pre-TV I

The practice of audience measurement and the development of the ratings system did not begin with the birth of television; instead it began with radio broadcasting. Unlike print media, such as newspapers, which could measure it's audience and reach through circulation figures, and movie theatres which could track ticket sales, radio broadcasters had no tangible way to measure their audience.[36] In the commercial US context, in order to be able to sell the radio audience to advertisers a method needed to be implemented that allowed broadcasters to *find* out how many people were listening to their programmes. This would afford the radio industry a means of making claims

[36] Buzzard, *Tracking the Audience: The Ratings Industry From analog to Digital*.

about the size and value of its audience, and enforce the notion that "audiences [were] fixed and controllable."[37] The first method utilised in the United States to *find* the broadcast audience was implemented in 1929. This method of audience measurement consisted of the 'telephone recall'. This involved telephoning and interviewing people about their previous evening's listening habits. As James Webster notes:

> At the time, the telephone was an unconventional tool for conducting survey research, but it seemed well suited for measuring something as far-flung and rapidly changing as the radio audience[38].

A survey technique known as *quota sampling* was used to choose who would be called, whereby "desired sample sizes, or quotas, were established for various subclasses, such as age, gender and income, to ensure that the characteristics of the sample were distributed in the same proportion as the characteristics of the population." [39] This demonstrates that demographics have played an important part in collecting and analysing data since the age of radio as even at the very beginning of broadcast audience research there was a need to segment the broadcast audience into basic socio-economic categories. This will become more important, as demographics become one of the main methods of segmenting and separating out the broadcast audience.

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[37] Gorton, *Media Audiences: Television, Meaning and Emotion*, 11.

[38] James G. Webster, Patricia F. Phalen, and Lawrence Wilson Lichty, *Ratings Analysis : The Theory and Practice of Audience Research*, (N.J.: L. Erlbaum Associates, 2006), 95.

[39] Ibid., 15-16.

The use of demographic segmentation here demonstrates how demographics have been an integral part of the broadcast industry's conceptualisation and construction of the audience since the first uses of audience measurement.

In 1938 the 'telephone recall' was adapted into the 'telephone coincidental'. This consisted of telephoning and interviewing people during the evening's broadcast, while the audience was in the process of listening. The method was simple. Those answering the phone were asked: "1) were you listening to the radio just now? 2) To what program were you listening? 3) Over what station is that program coming? 4) What advertiser puts on that program?"[40] Then the interviewees were asked how many men, women and children were listening to the radio when the telephone rang[41]. Demographics were still an important aspect in how the telephone coincidental operated, as one of the questions dealt with who within the family was listening to the programme. While the aim of the telephone coincidental was to track how popular programmes were, the tracking of demographics demonstrate that the construction of the broadcast audience still relied on segmenting it in some fashion.

During the same period, UK radio was produced within a public service context, and was not funded through advertising revenue but instead through the license fee. The BBC was the only radio broadcaster in the UK from the 1920's until 1973. As Tim Madge argues, this context meant that "the BBC was…not

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[40] Webster, Phalen, and Lichty, *Ratings Analysis : The Theory and Practice of Audience Research*, 97.

[41] Karen Buzzard, "Cooprative Analysis of Broadcasting," in *Encyclopedia of Radio*, ed. Christopher H. Sterling (London: Routledge, 2004), 643.

so interested in audience size as in audience attitudes to programmes"[42]. The crucial question for the BBC in 1922 was not how large the radio audience was, but instead "were the listeners served or not?"[43] Official research into the radio audiences in the UK began in 1935. This combined letters sent in from listeners, to gauge audience response to programmes, with the number of licenses sold to estimate the total audience number. The focus of the research was primarily audience appreciation. The research methods utilised included daily surveys, where respondents wrote down which programmes they listened to and whether they liked or disliked them, and listening panels, where programmes were played to a small audience and their reactions recorded[44]. In the pre TV I era the BBC were able to estimate the size of their audience through license fee sales, and were instead concerned with finding out what their audience thought of their programming.

It becomes evident that even from the inception of broadcasting, the radio industry was trying to gather data about its audience. Whether this was to sell this audience to advertisers, or to ensure the programming was well received, audience measurement played a role in constructing the broadcast audience for the radio industry. It is important to note that demographic data was used to help generate audience data, as the television industry will later base its conceptualisation of the audience on demographics.

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[42] Tim Madge, *Beyond the BBC: Broadcasters and the Public in the 1980s* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1989), 26.
[43] Ibid., 25.
[44] John Goslino, "Radio Listeners' Panel: Qualitative Mail Survey," Audience Dialogue, 27th May 2012. http://www.audiencedialogue.net/case2.html.

Finding the Television Audience in TV I

1948 was the first year that ratings were developed for the television audience in the US. Accordingly, the audience measurement methods discussed in this section were used to *find* both the audience of both television and radio.[45] 1948 was also the year A.C. Nielsen became a major competitor in the US ratings business, which was now concerned with both radio and television, and referred to as the "information business"[46]. Nielsen's primary method of data collection was an invention called the 'audimeter', which recorded everything broadcast on a family's radio. The audimeter was then mailed back to Nielsen, where the recording was studied. This allowed Nielsen and his company to develop theories about audience reach, frequency and flow.[47] Nielsen utilised *stratified sampling* to choose which families to monitor. Karen Buzzard writes:

> Stratified sampling applied random sampling not to the total sample, but to subdivisions in it. Internal consistency was achieved by scientifically controlling eight dimensions of the radio audience sample in proportion to their actual numbers in the population: the number of radio homes; the geographical location; the size of each

[45] Anon, "Hooperating," Cyclopaedia, http://www.cyclopaedia.info/wiki/Hooperating.
[46] Buzzard, *Tracking the Audience: The Ratings Industry From analog to Digital*, 22.
[47] Anon, "Glossary of Media Terms," Nielsen Media, http://www.nielsenmedia.com/glossary/terms/C/.

> locality; and the size of families, their occupation, their income, their race, and their telephone ownership[48].

While demographics had been monitored since the telephone coincidental, it is in this period, with the method of stratified sampling, that demographics became a more integral part of how the broadcasting and advertising industries constructed their ideas of the audience. This was in part due to enabling technological innovations. Whilst the total number of viewers a broadcast attracted was still more important than the demographic composition of that audience, and early demographics were largely concerned with geographic location [49], their use demonstrates the demand from both broadcasters and advertising agencies for more specific demographic information about their audiences. Although the ratings system was still, ultimately, creating a single number based on the total audience, the methodology used to find that single number was now taking audience demographics into account[50].

Arbitron was founded in 1949 as the American Research Bureau (ARB) and began solely measuring television audiences. This shift in industrial attention demonstrates that television had begun to overtake radio as the dominant

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[48] Buzzard, *Tracking the Audience: The Ratings Industry From analog to Digital*, 23.

[49] As opposed to their hobbies, behaviours etc.

[50] In February 1950 Hooper sold his services to Nielsen, whose ability to deliver more in-depth demographic and financial information to advertisers and broadcasters allowed him to dominate the ratings industry. Buzzard, *Tracking the Audience: The Ratings Industry From analog to Digital*, 29.

medium for advertisers, and the dominant focus of the ratings industry. By the 1950s ARB was using diaries as the primary method of data collection, rather than as a supplement to other methods. The diary method entailed each family member filling out a separate viewing diary about their habits for one week at the beginning of the month. This provided broadcasters and advertisers with more extensive demographic information on who was engaging with their programming, as it measured what programmes individuals were watching, not households. Again, while the main focus of the ratings industry was still the find the total number of viewers, the viewing habits of individuals were being measured, so basic demographics such as age and gender were gaining importance in the methodologies used to calculate audience ratings, and how the television audience was constructing their intended audience.

In order to compete with Nielsen's audimeter, ARB launched Arbitron in 1959. The Arbitron was a device that operated similarly to Nielsen's audimeter, an electronic meter attached to a TV set that registered tuning and channel switching. The Arbitron "provided instantaneous measurement. Telephone lines linked TV sets in sample homes to a central computing office."[51] The shift towards procuring data from technology and not audience members themselves began a trend in audience and market research. Self-reporting methods were deemed unreliable, and it was easier to find the audience by collecting quantitative data through devices, rather than through direct interaction with audience members. This meant that calculating audience

[51] Ibid., 41.

numbers was still more important that discovering audience tastes and behaviours, and demonstrates that the ratings industry was still concerned with quantitative data, which could be easily numerically and statistically communicated, over qualitative data.

The first television audience research methods in TV I were concerned with finding the entire audience of a television programme, shifting from phone calls, to diaries to monitoring technology to create an accurate numerical value, and then selling that to advertisers. TV I can be understood as "the era of channel scarcity, [and] the mass audience"[52]. TV I's broadcasters therefore produced TV-shows with an intended mass audience as they wanted to attract as many viewers as possible. While advertisers and broadcasters were aware that different demographics had different relationships with television programming, the main focus during TV I was still on *finding* the total number of viewers a programme attracted.

The programming strategies utilised in TV I reinforced this notion that the US television environment was concerned with appealing to the mass broadcast audience it had found through the ratings system. Jason Mittell writes that:

> [Networks] looked to fill their schedules with shows that offered the 'least objectionable programming' possible – shows that made it on the air promised both to appeal to as many average viewers

[52] Pearson, "Cult Television as Digital Television's Cutting Edge," 107.

> as possible and to attract a broad range of sponsors to buy commercial time.[53]

The medium of television had also become one of the "central communicative and cultural forces[s] within society… [which] derived from its availability and ubiquity; as early as 1960 more than 87% of U.S. households had televisions."[54] As the ratings industry was concerned with finding the mass audience, the programming in this period was concerned with attracting the mass audience. The concept of least objectionable programming was based around the concept that the intended audience for television was a family audience, as television viewing was a family activity, so all broadcasting must be suitable for this audience[55]. Because of this, the focus of audience research in TV I was mostly based around households. While individual demographic information was gathered in this period, the focus of the ratings system was still on finding the total number of viewers, rather than demographic breakdowns. As previously noted, TV I in the US is described as "the three-network hegemony [ABC, CBS and NBC]."[56] These networks had exclusive control of the market, so there was no incentive for these networks to take a financial risk and create programming that catered to niche audiences. The methods used to calculate television ratings reflected this, focussing on overall numbers rather than

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[53] Jason Mittell, "The "Classic Network System" in the US," in *The Television History Book,* ed. Michelle Hilmes (London: British Film Institute, 2003): 44.

[54] Amanda D. Lotz, *The Television Will Be Revolutionized* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 31.

[55] Meaning that all content had to be suitable for children, and little programming produced was controversial or experimental in fear of alienating this audience.

[56] Pearson, "Cult Television as Digital Television's Cutting Edge," 107.

specific demographics, as “during the 1960s the emphasis in ratings was on numbers alone.”[57]

However, some programmes did not have an intended mass audience. Instead programming schedules and timeslots were used to address the needs of specific intended audiences. Amanda Lotz writes that:

> Particular address of audiences or their needs was largely accomplished through the networks’ daily schedule construction. Women and children tended to be more likely to watch throughout hours in the morning and afternoon, and the networks accordingly devised their programs to match the tastes of the audiences most valued by their advertisers.[58]

Even in TV I there is evidence that the television industry was aware of demographics, and had begun to separate out the mass broadcast audience into its demographic sub-categories. The subgroups were frequently understood by the times when they watched television. For example, soap operas were designed to appeal to housewives, so were broadcast in the early afternoon when these women would be home, but their husbands and children would be at work and school. The television industry could predict when family members would be able to watch television, create programming intended for

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[57] Jane Feuer, Paul Kerr, and Tise Vahimagi, *MTM : "Quality Television"* (London: BFI Pub., 1984), 3.

[58] Amanda D. Lotz, *Beyond Prime Time : Television Programming in the Post-Network Era* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 2.

them, and broadcast it at those times. Dannielle Blumenthal writes on the origins of the soap opera genre that:

> The shows were initially conceived of as a melodramatic vehicle to sell household products, like soap, to the listening housewife – thus the nickname 'soap operas'… In the 1950s, soap operas began to be televised, but still during weekdays, in the daytime – when the breadwinner of the house was assumed to be out getting paid for 'his' labour.[59]

As women made most of the household purchases, advertisers wanted to advertise their household products primarily to women, and this time slot was one where housewives would primarily have control of the television. During the early afternoon programmes were aired that were specifically intended for women, to sell products aimed at women. Even in TV I networks had begun to group and frame television programmes in ways to appeal to different audiences, and project different cultural values onto both its viewers and its critics. This meant that even before the rise of multiple channels, each channel would specifically tailor its broadcast time slots in order to reach an intended audience demographic.

The UK television industry was also concerned with *finding* its audience in TV I. Until 1955 the BBC was the only television channel broadcasting in the UK and, like radio before it, audience research focussed on audience appreciation

[59] Dannielle Blumenthal, *Women and Soap Opera: A Cultural Feminist Perspective* (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1997), 92.

rather than size (which was measured through license fee sales). In 1955 the first commercial television channel in the UK, ITV, began to broadcast, and "winning and losing audience shares became more and more critical to broadcasting,"[60] similar to the competition between ABC, CBS, and NBC in the US. While the BBC continued to undertake audience research in-house, ITV had to introduce and implement an audience ratings system that advertisers would accept. The result was Television Audience Measurement (TAM), which installed meters in selected homes. These meters measured which channel the television set was tuned to, similar to the audimeter and Arbitron. Both channels were in direct competition with each other, as the BBC had to prove it provided a service that was adequate in return for the license fee and ITV had to prove that commercial television was viable in the UK and attract advertisers. Consequently, both channels produced programmes that would attract a mass audience.[61] Nevertheless, similarly to the US, programming schedules and narrowcasting were used to divide this mass audience by predicting when demographics would be able to watch television, and schedule programmes accordingly. Children's programming would air in the early afternoon (for example, *Watch with Mother)*, followed by women's programming (*Mainly for Women: Wednesday Magazine),* before more general programming such as sports, news, and the weather, in the evening when men would return home from work.[62]

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[60] Madge, *Beyond the BBC: Broadcasters and the Public in the 1980s*, 87.

[61] Ibid., 90.

[62] "BBC Television - 15 April 1959 - BBC Genome," Genome Radio Times 1923-2009, http://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/schedules/bbctv/1959-04-15.

Programming schedules and structures were already being utilised in TV I to separate the mass audience, but advertisers were still sold advertising slots based on the total audience share a programme attracted, rather than on what specific demographics were watching a particular programme. This investigation of TV I has established that the broadcast audience has been conceptualised using a numerical system since the beginning of television. It also shows that, while in TV I the overall audience was the focus of advertisers and broadcasters, the mass audience was being nuanced. Using data, broadcasters could predict when certain demographics would be watching television and then created programmes to appeal to those audiences. While these intended audiences consisted of broad demographics, such as women and children, TV II and TV III become interested in targeting more specific and niche demographics, and segmented the television audience.

Knowing the Audience in TV II

In TV II the television industry became more concerned with trying to *know* the television audience. TV II is often described as either the post-network era or the cable era in the US, and is widely agreed to have occurred between the mid-1970s and mid-1990s. Roberta Pearson describes this era as the age of "channel/network expansion, quality television, and network branding

strategies."[63] Lotz argues that the US post-network era can been defined by five C's; choice, control, convenience, customization, and community.[64] All these five indicate how viewers during this era had a broader range of options of what to watch and had more control over what played on their television set. As the number of channels increased it was no longer feasible to attract the same mass audience, which meant that "advertisers were beginning to care more precisely who was watching the shows [because] it was individuals who brought products, not households, and that it was the precise *composition* of the household – age, sex, and income - that counted."[65] This meant that broadcasters were beginning to target specific niche audiences, and sell them to specific advertisers for specific products. As viewers had more choice over what to watch, competition for them increased. It is in this era that demographics began to play a much larger role in audience ratings, which resulted in more specific intended audiences.

A number of economic and technological advance took place in TV II, which contributed to the fracturing of the television audience and the intended audience becoming smaller. Focussing firstly on the economic changes, premium cable channels, such as HBO, charged a subscription fee for their programming. This meant they were less reliant on advertisers, or in the case of HBO, were completely ad free, and could focus on appealing to a specific audience, rather than attempting to appeal to advertisers. They could,

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[63] Pearson, "Cult Television as Digital Television's Cutting Edge," 107.
[64] Lotz, *The Television Will Be Revolutionized*.
[65] Todd Gitlin, *Inside Prime Time*, (California: University of California Press, 1994), 208.

therefore, create niche programming, secure in the knowledge that they would be financially recouped. This impacted on how premium networks could think about their audiences, as audience's status and importance became elevated above that of the advertisers. The rise of technologies in both the US and UK contexts, such as the VCR, also gave viewers more control over what they watched and when they watched it. This has led to the era also being described by Ellis as the 'age of availability', as programmes became available for audiences to watch in a myriad of ways and from a myriad of sources.

Technological changes also impacted the way television was watched in TV II. The VCR was one of the first devices that began to trouble understandings of how television was viewed. 50% of U.S. homes had a VCR by 1987, 65.4% had one by 1990 and 88.1% owned one by 2000[66], with a similar saturation of ownership in the UK.[67] The ability to record live programmes and play them back at different times also "allowed viewers to negate programmers' strategies through time-shifting… [and] also enabled the television set to function entirely independently of the networks' linear program schedules."[68] The VCR could also, crucially, be used to skip advertisements. At a time when the individual was becoming more important to the television industry and advertisers, the individual was also gaining more control over television. While

[66]Lotz, *The Television Will Be Revolutionized*, 53.

[67] Anon, "Death of Video Recorder in Sight," BBC News, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/business/4031223.stm. Paul Edwards, "Vhs and Home Video - the Story of It's Rise and Fall," Death by Films: Film, TV, Gaming, Tech, http://www.deathbyfilms.com/the-rise-and-fall-of-vhs-and-home-video. Karen Dickinson, *Off Key: When Film and Music Won't Work Together* (Oxford University Press, 2008), 138.

[68]Lotz, *The Television Will Be Revolutionized*, 52.

the networks had fractured and separated out the broadcast audience to focus on small, valuable demographics, viewers were also separating themselves from the broadcast audience through VCRs and cable subscriptions

These factors fractured the television audience, as the number of channels and programmes increased, the audience shares decreased. Networks turned away from solely concentrating on the mass broadcast audience, and used what they knew about the tastes and preferences of their audiences to create programming aimed at intended niche audience markets. Networks then implemented narrowcasting to build up a core base of viewers that shared specific interests or belonged to the same demographic profile.

One specific demographic became very important in TV II: the 'quality audience'. This audience was, according to Ellen Seiter and Mary Jeanne Wilson, "young, affluent viewers, with money to spend, and with the cultural capital that translates into recognition by industry tastemakers with Emmy's and other prestige awards",[69] making them desired by advertisers. In order to attract the 'quality audience', broadcasters began to try and produce 'quality television'. This demonstrates the shift within the ratings industry, as quality television speaks to debates surrounding taste, which allowed for a new way of categorising the television audience. While demographics separate the audience through socio-economic factors, *psychographic demographics*, also called psychographics*,* group the audience through shared tastes and

[69] Ellen Seiter and Mary Jeanne Wilson, "Soap Opera Survival Tactics," in *Thinking Outside the Box: A Contemporary Television Genre Reader*, ed. Gary R. Edgerton and Brian Geoffrey Rose (Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2005), 139.

preferences. This is a way of constructing audiences not just through what they are, but who they are and what they like. Richard Reese wrote that:

> During the early 1970s … the needs of advertisers began to change. Due to rapid shifts in income, education, and mobility, the demographic data provided by ratings research became less useful… The advertisers found that they needed to evaluate stations on more than market share.[70]

It was no longer adequate to simply find the audience, as the production of quality television had connected audiences with taste values. This shift in TV II towards *knowing* the audience in more complicated demographic terms links with certain psychographic assumptions towards what the quality audience might desire. Broadcasters wanted to *know* their audience's preferred genres and styles in television programming, in order to create programming that was intended to appeal to this intended audience's tastes.

Technological advances, including People Meters, Premium Cable and the VCR, also had an impact upon the ratings industry within TV II. Nielsen incorporated devices known as People Meters (PM) into their audience research methods in 1986. PMs are remotes where each family member presses a button when they begin watching television, and again when they stop. This means that what they watched, and how long they watched it for, was digitally recorded. While the audimeter had recorded what was broadcast in the past, it had measured

[70] Richard M. Reese and Wilbur W. Stanton, ""Home-Grown" Audience Research for Small Radio Stations," *Journal of Small Business Management (pre-1986)* 18, no. 02 (1980): 25.

households, not individuals. By separating out each member of the household the PM could supply specific data on which family members were watching which programmes, [71] allowing the television industry to *know* which demographics watched which programmes. This resulted in the industry constructing taste profiles for each demographic, and it began to predict what genres and styles of programming would be popular with each demographic. The more data gathered by the industry, the more predictions it could make about the television audience, which resulted in programmes having more specific intended audiences.

The implementation of PMs during TV II resulted "in growing pains as the networks and advertisers knew such a significant methodological shift would indicate some disparity from the established system." [72] Lotz writes on the anxiety that the PMs caused within the television industry, explaining that "the networks did not offer audience guarantees on advertising purchased upfront for the 1987-1988 season because of the uncertainty of the new measurement system." [73] The television and advertising agencies were eager to know who their audiences consisted of, and wanted to know more in-depth information about audience behaviour and habits, but the new methods of collecting data were untested and it was unknown how accurate the results it produced would be. This meant that the introduction of a new data collection method was a point of great concern and anxiety over how it would affect long-established

[71] Similar to the diary method from TV I, but PM's provided more specific detail on how long individuals were watching for.
[72] Lotz, *The Television Will Be Revolutionized*, 195.
[73] Ibid.

viewing figures. Like the audimeter, the PM recorded everything that was on television at the time the buttons were pressed. PMs were limited though, as it did not record whether the viewers were engaging with or focussed on the programme, or whether it was just playing in the background. Demographics did, nevertheless, allow specific socio-economic groups to be separated from the audience as a whole, and it became possible to measure which programmes attracted which demographics.

The fracturing of the television audience, from the mass to the niche, and the ever growing reliance on demographics resulted in a growing sense of anxiety surrounding the television industry regarding ratings. Gitlin writes that "a single rating-point difference, sustained over the course of an entire year, could be worth $50 million or more at 1981 advertising rates; so when a show is marginal and the numbers ambiguous, it's easy for actual and anticipated advertiser pressure to make the difference".[74] Gitlin's quote demonstrates the huge power ratings had over the television industry and the programming it created. The television industry would see what kinds of programmes were attracting the audiences that advertisers wanted, then create more similar programmes in the hope that this would continue to attract this audience. The television industry would ascertain an intended audience by comprehending data from programmes of a specific genre or style. However this was not a precise science, and often failed. Scott Siegler, then CBS vice-president for

[74] Gitlin, *Inside Prime Time*, 9-10.

drama development, spoke of the difficulty in predicting if a programme would be success with its target audience:

> Because it's a mass audience – it's an unimaginably large audience – the audience tastes are so diffused and so general that you've got to be guessing. You can work off precedents about what's worked on television before. You can work off whatever smattering of sociological information you gleaned from whatever sources. You can let your personal judgements enter into it to some extent… [You can ask whether] this is something that people in Georgia or Nebraska will appreciate because they'll be able to translate it into their understanding. But you never really know. And there are so many variables in programming that even when you've reached a pretty general consensus about a genre not working or a kind of attitude not working, you can never quite be sure that that rule applies… [These complications are] what makes the whole thing very precise and very empirical, and at the same time totally absurd and unpredictable.[75]

This points towards the main argument of Chapter 2, that audiences are not easily predictable. It also highlights that the television industry was aware of the limitations and flaws that came with constructing intended audiences based of audience research data. Although the television industry studied which genres and styles attracted which demographics, and, as Ang writes,

[75] Ibid., 22-23.

implemented "a range of risk-reducing techniques and strategies of regulating television programming such as serial production, usage of fixed formats and genres, spin-offs, horizontal scheduling, and so on", [76] anxieties and uncertainties about the audience remained. Siegler continued, "There are countless axioms that you hear in programming, and I think the one thing that you begin to learn is that all those axioms really represent are precedents that have been set, but not necessarily rules that work".[77] The development of the ratings system and demographic profiling had proved unreliable in allowing the television industry to really *know* their audience, predict what programmes would succeed and which would fail, and appeal to specific intended audiences.

There was not just concern over the effectiveness of ratings, but also how they were obtained and their accuracy. Developed from his interviews with industry personnel in the 1980s, Gitlin wrote:

> Then how good are the ratings? Most producers and writers are sceptical or downright hostile. Many blacks and Hispanics in the industry believe that Nielsen sample underrepresents minorities… Devotees of "quality" think it over represents heavy TV watchers, the proverbial beer guzzlers who wander in and out of the living room, easily satisfied with fluff. Moreover, they argue, Nielsen

[76] Ang, *Desperately Seeking the Audience*, 19.
[77] Gitlin, *Inside Prime Time*, 23.

> doesn't measure anyone's satisfaction, but only the raw number of households and eyeballs.[78]

While the television industry aimed to *know* their audience by gathering in-depth information about them through ratings and demographic breakdowns, and the increasing financial influence ratings had, there were still major concerns about their usefulness as a method of predicting whether audiences would like a programme, and their accuracy in general.

During TV II the number of viewers was becoming less notable than the *type* of viewers a programme was attracting; hence the networks needed to know who their audiences consisted of. NBC, which had fallen behind in the ratings in the late 1970s and early 1980s, "began stressing the importance of the demographic composition of the total, and even argued that the demographic parts could, thus calculated, be more important than their aggregate sum."[79] Pearson writes that "not until the early 1980s, during the transition from TV I to TV II, does it seem to have become standard practice to renew shows with relatively low ratings but high prestige – that is, the right viewers."[80] An American non-profit organisation, Viewers for Quality Television, was even set up in 1984 in order to save "...critically acclaimed programs from cancellation despite their Nielsen program rating."[81] This demonstrates that the single numbers produced by Nielsen were no longer reflecting the full value of a

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[78] Ibid., 49.

[79] Feuer, Kerr, and Vahimagi, *Mtm : "Quality Television"*, 63.

[80] Pearson, "Cult Television as Digital Television's Cutting Edge," 119.

[81] Dorothy C. Swanson, *The Story of the Viewers for Quality Television: From Grassroots to Prime Time*, (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 18.

programme, and how programmes with small but dedicated audiences were increasing in value to the television industry. TV II is the period when *demographic share* became more important than *audience share.* While Nielsen had begun to include simple demographic breakdowns of the audience a programme attracted in the mid-1960s,[82] it was not until TV II that knowing the demographic breakdown became more valuable to advertisers and broadcasters. In TV II, with the increased targeting of niche audiences, the kind of audience that networks attracted became paramount, and those channels which could attract the specific audiences that advertisers wanted prospered.

As a result, demographic breakdowns became more complex, with audiences no longer being categorised simply by age or gender. Demographics were ways of separating out audiences into different categories, but in TV II the value of these categories came from the way they were refined and combined. Rather than simply using the main variables, described by James Webster as age, race, gender, income, marital status, education and occupation[83], as a demographic, these variables were combined and the new demographics then consisted of a combination of these variables, for example males aged 34-45, or college graduates under 30 years old.

This culminated into an intensive desire for broadcasters to target specific demographics, because demographics are not valued equally by advertisers,

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[82] Broadcasting Publications, "Broadcasting Jul-Sep 1963," (Library of Congress, Motion Picture, Broadcasting and Recorded Sound Division, 2014), 24.
[83] Webster, Phalen, and Lichty, *Ratings Analysis : The Theory and Practice of Audience Research*, 34-35.

and therefore not valued equally by the television industry. For example, many television programmes are aimed at the 18-49 demographic, because, as Michael Storey writes, “Logical or not, advertisers covet the elusive 18 to 49 demographic. If you are under age 18 or older than 49, you pretty much don't count with many advertisers.”[84] This is due to a number of reasons. Advertisers believe younger viewers are more malleable and open to advertising, while older audiences are habitual and set in their ways. Younger audiences also tend to have more disposable income and fewer dependants. Because of this, younger audiences are worth more to advertisers, so they are also worth more to the television industry. Storey explains that:

> The prime example of this is a comparison between the geriatric-beloved *Murder, She Wrote* (1984-1996) and the younger-skewing *Friends* (1994-2004). Their runs overlapped a couple of seasons and they had about the same number of viewers. But *Friends* was able to get three times the money for one of its commercials because of its younger audience.[85]

While each programme and network has a different key demographic they aim to attract, they are generally composed of viewers within this age group, although there are exceptions that aim to capitalise on attracting less competitive demographics. For example, the WB TV network’s key

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[84] Michael Storey, "The Tv Column: Not in 18-49 Age Group? Tv Execs Write You Off," Arkansas Online, http://www.arkansasonline.com/news/2009/apr/23/tv-column-not-18-49-age-group-tv-execs-wr-20090423/.
[85] Ibid.

demographic was “eighteen- to thirty-four-year-old, educated, white, affluent viewers”.[86] CBS, in contrast, aimed to target an older audience, with Nina Tassler, CBS’s Head of Entertainment, saying that “While we enjoy winning in all the categories, 18 to 49 is not the end-all it’s made out to be.”[87] This meant that the methods used to collect ratings during TVII had to be able to distinguish between viewers and determine their demographic. As more channels and programmes were available for viewers to choose from there was a need for more in-depth demographic profiling of television viewers, which led into more programmes being created for niche audiences, creating a feedback loop that fractured the television audience.

A new programming strategy then arose, which acted in contrast to the previous broadcast system, with Bonnie Stuart writing that “[narrowcasting] applies to defining your audience using narrow terms rather than broad characteristics.”[88] The idea of narrowcasting came through the increasing use of demographics and market segmentation in audience research, but was quickly utilised in industry strategies to maintain audiences.[89] Programmes all aimed at the same demographic were scheduled together in an attempt to keep the same audience watching multiple programmes. In The National Arts Marketing Project, market segmentation is described thusly:

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[86] David Lavery, *The Essential Cult Tv Reader* (Kentucky: Kentucky University Press, 2010), 66.

[87] Andy Fixmer, "From CBS, Advertisers Get the Older Viewers They Want," Bloomberg Business, http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2012-09-06/from-cbs-advertisers-get-the-older-viewers-they-want.

[88] Bonnye E. Stuart, Marilyn S. Sarow, and Laurence Stuart. *Integrated Business Communication: In a Global Marketplace.* (New York: Wiley and Sons, 2007.) P68

[89] Tom Jory, "TV Talk: Narrowcasting and the Networks," *The Associated Press*, June 20 1980.

> The purpose of audience segmentation analysis is to identify those in the over-all population who will be most likely to appreciate and value the particular art in question so you can promote the work directly to them. In other words, in arts marketing, the goal of segmentation is to find audience members who will be most satisfied by the artistic product you have to offer. Market segmentation protects artists from pressures to shape works to fit the needs and tastes of an undefined mass of potential audience members.[90]

Milly Buonanno suggests that "narrowcasting is divisive and selective, just as broadcasting joins and unifies people. The former separates and isolates, the latter unites people and keeps them together."[91] As TV II moved away from broadcasting and into narrowcasting this meant that networks were dividing audiences up into smaller demographic segments, focussed around varying factors including age, hobbies, schedules and other variables to creating programming specific to them.

Once a broadcaster knew who their main demographic was, they attempted to fiercely target that specific demographic, making them their intended audience. Buonanno continues, "The vast audience united in front of a screen by a typical generalist programme aimed at families would, if confronted by

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[90] Dona Vitale, "Finding your Audience through Market Segmentation," (The National Arts Marketing Project, 2008), 2.

[91] Milly Buonanno, *The Age of Television: experiences and Theories* (Chicago: Intellect Books, 2007), 26.

narrowcasting, be split into fragments."[92] Networks were trying to *know* their audience in order to organise their viewers as members of specific age or interest groups, rather than a single unified audience. Buonanno also describes narrowcasting as "discriminatory"[93], demonstrating that demographics within the narrowcasting framework are clearly defined with no crossover between them. Levine and Parks reinforce this by writing that:

> With the increased penetration of cable and satellite delivery systems and the rise of the new networks since the 1980s, the family audience has become too fragmented to sustain conventional broadcasting strategies. Instead, television programmers have turned to narrowcasting to appeal to smaller segments of the population categorised by demographic traits, such as sex and race.[94]

As the ability to know who an audience consisted of became more viable, it became easier for networks to narrowcast programmes in order to maintain their intended audience. This also resulted in entire channels, or programming streams, having a specific intended audience. Importantly, whilst narrowcasting had become a main industry strategy, broadcasting did still exist, with the major networks still creating programming designed to attract the large, broadcast audience.

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[92] Ibid.

[93] Ibid.

[94] Mary Celeste Kearney et al., *Undead TV: Essays on Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Duke: Duke University Press, 2007), 20.

Demographics and intended audiences also became more important in the UK during TV II, as during this period the Broadcasting Act of 1980 began the process of setting up a second commercial channel in the UK. In 1981 the Broadcasters Audience Research Board, or BARB, was set up to replace ITV's and the BBC's audience measurement systems to streamline audience measurement in the UK and produce unbiased, trusted audience ratings, in preparation for the launch of Channel 4 in 1982.[95] Similarly to Nielsen, BARB provided viewing data across multiple channels (first the BBC and ITV, and later Channel 4) which was used to assess the success of programmes and could be supplied to advertisers. This shift meant that audience measurement in the UK had shifted towards focussing on gathering numerical data about audience sizes, and moved away from focussing on the perception of programmes. It is at this moment that the UK and the US ratings system became more similar and shared a common aim. Channel 4's public service remit specifically stated that it "had to appeals to the tastes and interests of a culturally diverse society", [96] meaning that it needed to attract viewers that were often marginalised or not catered to on other channels. This means that, since its very inception, Channel 4 has been concerned with attracting specific demographics.[97] One of the strategies used to achieve this was 'stranded

[95] Stefan Schwarzkopf, "The Politics of Enjoyment: Competing Audience Measurement Systems in Britain, 1950-1980," in *Television Audiences across the World: Deconstructing the Ratings Machine*, ed. Jérôme Bourdon and Cécile Méadel (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 48.

[96] "Channel 4," OFCOM, http://licensing.ofcom.org.uk:80/tv-broadcast-licences/current-licensees/channel-4/.

[97] Balnaves, "Still the British Model?: The Barb Versus Nielsen," 58.

programming', which was similar to the pre-existing tactic of programming scheduling but with more demographic distinctions. For example, teenagers were specifically targeted with the T4 programming strand. [98] This demonstrates that televisual environments in both the US and the UK were using similar programming structures as strategies to attract and keep valuable intended audiences (either politically like C4 or financially) watching their programming.

TV II contained a lot of changes for the television and ratings industries. The mass broadcast audience was fractured by technological advancements, and niche audiences became more valuable. This led to more in-depth methods to gather data about audiences, which resulted in demographics becoming more complex and the intended television audience becoming more specific and nuanced.

Analysing the Digital Audience in TV III

Audience measurement remained mostly unchanged in its methods until the mid-1990s when a new form of viewing programmes and a new advertising space became popular: the internet. The post-internet, 'digital era' televisual environment, which spans from the mid-1990s to the present day, is referred to by Rogers et al as TV III. This, according to Ellis, is the 'age of plenty', with an emphasis on the multi-channel, multi-screen televisual environment. This resulted in an age of uncertainty for the television industry, as audience

[98] Mary Debrett, *Reinventing Public Service Television for the Digital Future* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 73.

behaviours changed and developed outside of the control of television and media networks. This uncertainty motivated the television industry's desire to know more about their audience, to *analyse* the audience in more detail. TV III is characterised by a number of factors, including "the end of the distribution bottleneck due to new digital distribution technologies (e.g. digital TV, the internet, etc.), lowering entry barriers, thus allowing new entrants and more competition."[99] Peter Golding develops this by arguing that:

> The explosion of information channels and media creates a possibility for a narrowing of their interest range in each case, fostering fragmentation of audiences and specialised consumption. What emerges is a 'special-interest mosaic', conglomerating in ever-smaller niche collectivises of interest around special concerns or activities.[100]

The televisual environment changed dramatically in TV III, and developed into a post-network media environment where digitized television content is commonplace. The increased amount of media available for consumption by viewers caused audiences to divide into smaller, more niche intended audiences.

Audiences were not just fragmented through the amount of content available, but also how they could consume it. As Amanda Lotz writes, "practices have

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[99] Will Prestes, "TV III Branding," in *Social Media Camp* (London, 2008).

[100] Peter Golding, "The Cost of Citizenship in the Digital Age," in *Relocating Television: Television in the Digital Context*, ed. Jostien Gripsrud, (New York: Routledge, 2010), 213.

led the television audience not only to fracture among different channels and devices, but also to splinter temporally."[101] Television no longer needed to be an 'event', a shared experience, or viewed within a carefully constructed broadcast schedule. Programmes could instead be viewed in isolation from the programming that surrounded them, decreasing the power and influence of narrowcasting. Just as television programmes could become fractured from their broadcast context, the television audience was also being separated out into smaller sub-divisions. Barbara Gentikow writes that television transformed from "a mass medium into a personal medium",[102] arguing that with the rise of internet access, multi-television homes and mobile devices, television sets were no longer even shared between family members. James Bennett argues that online on-demand platforms that stream television programming "provide an experience that promises the freedom to decide what to watch and when to watch it and, in doing so, fragment the previously mass audience of television into a series of personalized choices."[103] The focus on the individual, as opposed to the mass audience, or even the specific demographic, means that networks in TV III aimed to *analyse* their audience as individuals. *Analysing* in this chapter refers to this in-depth knowledge about individual viewers and their behaviours, rather than audiences as a whole.

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[101] Lotz, *The Television Will Be Revolutionized*.

[102] Barbara Gentikow, "Television use in New Media Environments," in *Relocating Television: Television in the Digital Context*, ed. Jostein Gripsrud (New York: Routledge, 2010), 147.

[103] James Bennett and Niki Strange, *Television as Digital Media*, Console-Ing Passions (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 2.

Importantly, this chapter does not argue that broadcasting no longer existed; there were still remnants of features from TV I in the TV III era. Nonetheless, with the introduction of new technologies, the mass broadcast audience has lost its monopoly on advertisers attention, and niche audiences became valuable audiences sought after by advertisers and networks. Boddy furthers this argument by writing that:

> The decision in 2006 of the world's second largest broadcasting trade show, the International Broadcasting Convention, to drop any reference of 'broadcasting' altogether in the organization's name and event in favour of the generic acronym IBC literalized the broadcast industry's rebranding to a post-broadcast sector.[104]

Technological developments in TV III also changed the relationship between the television industry and advertisers. With the creation of PVR (personal video recorder) technology, such as TiVo in the US and Sky+ in the UK, programmes could be recorded and adverts fast-forwarded through more easily.[105] This extra level of control granted to the viewer made it harder for advertisers to ensure their products were getting exposed to their intended audience. To combat this time-shifting ability, and ensure ratings still truly reflected audience size, ratings companies began to use Enhanced Audio Matching (EAM) technology. This technology recognised programmes up to six

[104]William Boddy, "Is It TV Yet?," in *Television as Digital Media*, ed. James Bennett and Niki Strange, Console-Ing Passions (Durham, DC: Duke University Press Books, 2011), 78.
[105] Although this was still possible in TV II using the VCR, the process became more straight forward with the implementation of these new services.

days after broadcast by matching audio signals to reference databases, to calculate 'near live viewing' (NLV) audience numbers, and 'viewing on same day as live' (VOSDAL) numbers, and add them to audience ratings.[106]

These methods still only produced ratings numbers, and other methods were being created and utilised that gave more in-depth data about audience make-up and behaviour. TV on demand services, such as Netflix, could record much more detailed information about their audience. Because they are paid by subscription fees, Netflix operated similarly to premium cable channels such as HBO, so they could focus more on pleasing their intended audience, who funded them directly, than appealing to advertisers. They could, therefore, begin to use psychographic profiles to create new programming that would appeal to, what they called, audience 'clusters',[107] that is specific types of intended audiences. Owner Ted Sarandos states in an interview that,

> With streaming, we have insight into every second of the viewing experience. I know what you have tried and what you have turned off. I know at what point you turned it off. It's very sophisticated.[108]

This level of data recorded about viewer habits turned niche audiences into even more granular audiences. Sarandos goes on to say that Netflix was focussed on:

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[106] Bourdon and Méadel, *Television Audiences across the World: Deconstructing the Ratings Machine*, 241.

[107] David Z. Morris, "Netflix Says Geography, Age, and Gender Are "Garbage" for Predicting Taste," Fortune Magazine, http://fortune.com/2016/03/27/netflix-predicts-taste/.

[108] Ted Sarandos, "Ted Sarandos - Audience Tastes | Carsey-Wolf Center at Uc Santa Barbara," http://www.carseywolf.ucsb.edu/mip/ted-sarandos-%E2%80%93-audience-tastes.

> Trying to match tastes, and tastes are really specific—even in your own household… We invest in a lot of content for really small audiences, too, because it's still valuable for our subscribers who are really engaged fans of a particular program and, therefore, it's still a valuable investment for us.[109]

Netflix wanted to analyse their online audience's behaviour to create and purchase content that caters to intended audiences with specific tastes. To do this Netflix utilises algorithms that, as Sarandos describes:

> Are incredibly precise and draw from multiple data points. The star rating is a dependable indicator. You watched this show, and you rated it five stars. If you rated the show but didn't stream it because you saw it in a theater, on a DVD, or you just rated it because you like a particular actor it features, the algorithm weighs the rating slightly less. Similarly, if you only partially watch something and rate it, you degrade the ratings value, too. We account for all of those behaviors.
>
> We also have implemented a lot of predictive mechanisms: people who love x, y, and z also love these films but hate those films. We've made really incredible strides to predict what people watch right after they finish something else. Basically, it's a statistical push

[109] Ibid.

> based on what other people have watched and really enjoyed immediately after viewing the same program you just finished.[110]

Rather than creating narrowcasting using data gathered from audiences, Netflix began to curate audiences' recommendations through the use of individuals' tastes and preferences. By using such in-depth analytics, Netflix also created an original programme, *House of Cards* (2013-). Production decisions were made using the data gathered from Netflix's audience metrics. For example, Kevin Spacey was cast in the main role because Netflix knew audiences liked him and watched content he starred in.[111] Using such specific data gathered from its audiences, Netflix could refine its intended audience and create programming that had a higher chance of attracting this intended audience.

Audience behaviour was becoming more important than audience composition, and Rohit Bhargava argues that the television industry needed to stop categorising its audiences by demographics entirely, and instead focus on how the audience responds and reacts to the programming it engaged with. By starting to *analyse* the specific behaviours, preferences and tastes of their audience, the television industry is able to start creating extremely targeted programming to very specific, intended audiences.

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[110] Ibid.

[111] Mark Sweney, "Netflix Gathers Detailed Viewer Data to Guide Its Search for the Next Hit," *The Guardian*, 2014-02-23 2014.

While standard demographics have been utilised by the television industry for many years, the era of niche marketing and the multi-channel environment has led to the creation of even more complex, specific demographic profiles. This further fragmentation of the audience increases the risk of a programme failing. By having to attract very specific audiences it can be damaging for a programme or network if they do not attract enough of that audience (during the 2009-2012 period, 65% of new US television programmes were cancelled after their first season).[112] Due to the high number of channels and programmes available, this method of targeting very specific demographics became one of the only ways to attract an audience at all. Demographics are based on socio-economic factors, and while trends can be extrapolated from previously collected data, individual tastes still play a part in audience formation. Just because an audience is the same age and educated to the same level does not necessarily mean they will like the same programming. The use of demographic profiling has become so contested that Todd Yellin, VP of product at Netflix, announced in 2016 that they were no longer interested in, or using, demographics as all, stating that "Geography, age, and gender? We put that in the garbage heap."[113] Instead psychographics are being utilised,[114]

[112] Anthony Ocasio, "Tv Success Rate: 65% of New Shows Will Be Canceled (& Why It Matters)," Screen Rant, http://screenrant.com/tv-success-rate-canceled-shows-aco-172162/.
[113] Morris, "Netflix Says Geography, Age, and Gender Are "Garbage" for Predicting Taste."
[114] Samuel Smith, "Psychographic Targeting and Message Customization in Online Advertising: The Problem with Demographics," iSamuel, http://isamuel.com/qualia/psychographic-targeting-and-message-customization-in-online-advertising/.

a method that involves categorising audiences through their common tastes, rather than their socio-economic station.

As audiences moved online, Lotz noted that "the existing paradigm of audience measurement proved increasingly inadequate to the variation characteristic of post-network television". [115] The ratings industry had to answer the new question of how to analyse digital audiences in order to monetise them. Nuances between the UK and US television industry responses to, and strategies to manage, their audiences, also become less significant during TVIII. Online content breaks down transnational barriers, [116] and the number of companies that operated globally increased (for example, Netflix, Amazon, and the BBC). Transnational barriers have become weakened in TV III so when discussing Google, Netflix, YouTube etc. the UK and US distinction, hitherto discussed around the television industry, becomes less important[117]. As online content becomes available globally the same technologies and techniques are used to analyse this audience. This section therefore discussed ratings and data analytics that are applicable to both the US and the UK because, even though different companies are responsible for producing ratings (Nielsen and BARB respectively) they are increasingly using the same techniques and have the same concerns.

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[115] Lotz, *The Television Will Be Revolutionized*, 194.

[116] Innocenti, Perla. *Migrating Heritage: Experiences of Cultural Networks and Cultural Dialogue in Europe.* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2016.) p6

[117] While there are strategies such as Geo-locking which aims to maintain international borders for online content, generally more content is available internationally and many companies use the same methods to produce ratings in both the US and the UK.

TV III has seen a rise in the use of data metrics and audience tracking to analyse the television audience across the fractured media landscape. Intended audiences have become more niche, with specific demographic profiles and increasingly, psychographics, being catered to by different programmes. Competition for audiences is fierce in TV III, so the television industry is anxious to attract the intended audiences they want in order to sell them to advertisers.

Conclusion

As Ang has stated, "the truth constructed by ratings discourse is built on quicksand: it delivers knowledge that is both politically and epistemologically precarious" [118]. This chapter has traced how the television industry has constructed its audience through the use of the ratings system, and how this has resulted in the television industry creating programmes for intended audiences. While the US and UK ratings industries operated within different contexts and began audience measurement for different reasons, as the US wanted to sell audiences to advertisers and the BBC wanted to prove its public value, both the US and the UK needed to systemically find, know and analyse the television audience in order to fulfil their aims. While this is schematic and typologically neat it did allow me to map how the television industry has changed its emphasis when dealing with audience ratings as the televisual environment and technologies have developed. How audiences have been

[118] Ang, *Desperately Seeking the Audience*, 97.

found, known and analysed has changed as the televisual landscape has evolved. There is a sense of progression, with each new era utilising new technological advances to achieve a greater level of nuance and refinement. David Marc writes that broadcast's "nation-as-audience" had changed to the post-broadcast era's "nation-of-audiences" [119] as television technologies developed. In the early years of television, during TVI, the ratings system utilised methods that had been developed to measure the radio broadcast audience.

However, none of these methods illuminated *who* was listening to broadcasts, just that they were being listened to. In the 1950s diaries were incorporated into ratings research, with each family member filling out a separate viewing diary about their habits. This provided broadcasters and advertisers with the first demographic information on who was listening to their programming. Nonetheless, the focus in TV I was still on sheer numbers with the methodological challenge being simply *finding* the audience. *Who* the audience was, was less important than how big the audience was. While there was some demographic profiling, with certain programmes broadcast at certain times of day, the broadcast, family audience was still the most profitable one.

Later, as more television stations were launched and cable television was introduced, the importance of demographics increased. In this post-network era programmes were created to attract profitable demographics, which were

[119] David Marc, "What Was Broadcasting?," in *Television: The Critical View*, ed. Horace Newcombe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 629.

not necessarily large audiences. Technological advances also granted more power to the viewer, who, thanks to devices such as the VCR, could choose when to watch programmes. Local and Personal People Meters would record family members separately in order to more accurately obtain the viewing habits of different ages and genders, and this information was used to tailor-make programming designed to appeal to the specific audiences and demographics that advertisers wanted to reach. TV II television networks were able to, and desired to, *know* exactly who their audiences were comprised of, and use this data to produce programming that would attract the demographics that advertisers valued most.

TV III, the Digital Age, heralded an era with even more viewer control. Due to the number of technological devices that can be used to access television media, programmes can be viewed in isolation of the broadcast schedules, their channel brands, their networks and their advertisements. The audience is fractured among multiple different demographics, as well as temporally. The television industry aims to attract a small, but loyal, niche audience, but with new media technologies these audiences no longer have be a part of the same demographic. As algorithms and data analytics grant the television industry and advertisers new ways of finding and tracking audiences, psychographics can be used to categorise them. This, alongside the ability to compile data on audience behaviours, meant that broadcasters could *analyse* their audience and create specific programming that would both appeal to them psychographically, but also fit in with their viewing habits.

It was important for the broadcast industry and its advertisers to know who was engaging with their broadcasts, as it soon became the basis for determining how much advertising slots would cost and how effective they were. Gitlin argues that "regardless of flaws, the presumed rationality of audience measurement…works just well enough to satisfy advertisers that they are getting their money's worth. That is all it really has to accomplish."[120] While the television industry has used ratings as a method of trying to understand audience tastes and behaviours, ultimately Gitlin believes that the only use of ratings is to sell programming to advertisers, and that they do not work as a method of audience research.

This chapter has demonstrated that the television industry has spent many years refining and developing the methods by which it tries to understand its audience. The shifts towards a greater refinement and granularity in finding, knowing and analysing the television audience has led to the development of a number of audience management strategies. This includes branding, scheduling, tele-participation, the development of transmedia content, and the development of online viewing platforms such as Netflix. By using what it knows of audience behaviours the television industry uses these management strategies to attempt to predict its audience, and manage them to behave the way the networks and advertisers want them to. Crucially the television industry does not always get this right. As Ang notes, "institutional knowledge does not only offer us limited insight into the concrete practices and

[120] Gitlin, *Inside Prime Time*, 62.

experiences of the television audiencehood; it is also ultimately unable to supply the institutions with the definitive guarantee of control they so eagerly seek."[121] Despite all the methods and techniques they utilise, the television industry does not always know who its audience is. The above methodologies are not perfect systems. As Scott Siegler, CBS vice-president for drama, stated when interviewed: "the whole thing [is] very precise and very empirical, and at the same time totally absurd and unpredictable."[122] The television industry and advertisers occasionally create programming that does not resonate with or appeal to its target audience, and instead other audiences, accidental audiences, emerge. Parallel to that, strategies of management for when they do get these wrong become more important.

Having established the intended (and measured) audience of the television industry, this thesis will now focus on the actual television audience, as it is from within this actual audience that the accidental audience emerges. The following chapters are concerned with exploring the unforeseen circumstances that arise when the television industry believes they know exactly who their audience is and becoming blinkered to other audiences they are possibly attracting, until these accidental audiences make themselves known in some way.

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[121] Ang, *Desperately Seeking the Audience*, 154.

[122] Scott Siegler inGitlin, *Inside Prime Time*, 23.

Chapter Two

Framing the Accidental Audience

Chapter One was concerned with examining how the television industry has using the ratings system, attempted to find the intangible television audience and transform it into a tangible number. This has resulted in a statistical method of constructing the television audience. In order to exist, an audience must be identified and measured by a ratings system, such as Nielsen. If they are measured, they are deemed to exist, they are then assigned a number, and that determines their value to the television industry. If they are not identified and measured they do not generate a number, do not exist to the television industry and therefore have no value. This is, however, an overly simplistic view of the situation, as in reality audience numbers do not neatly correspond to the numbers generated by the ratings system. This chapter will begin to complicate the idea of the television audience, use theorists to examine the complex reality of the television audience and problematize the quantitative model used by the ratings industry. It will use Napoli to complicate the industry's model of the audience, and introduce the discrepancy between *predicted* and *measured* audiences, and the *actual* audience of programmes.[123] It will then explore and interrogate the idea of the *actual* audience, utilising academics such as Ang, Alasuutari, Grossberg and Moores. Existing academic methods of

[123] Napoli utilises the term 'predicted audience' for a number of reasons. Firstly, his research approaches audience conceptualisation from an economic standpoint, and secondly his framework considers temporal implications. While semiotically there are minor differences between the terms, as 'predicted' refers to the audience the industry think will watch, and 'intended' refers to the audience the industry wants to watch a programme, this thesis will use the term 'intended' except when specifically referring to Napoli's model.

conceptualising audiences that do not fit within the industrial framework will be interrogated, and the model of the *accidental audience* will then be introduced as a method to organise and understand the complex reality of the *actual audience*. The *accidental audience* framework operates on the assumption that audiences are complex and unpredictable, but that does not mean the industry cannot manage this unpredictability.

The Audience Marketplace

The television ratings system's purpose is to translate the intangible television audience into a solid number, which can be understood and presented to advertisers or, in the case of public service broadcasting, the government and public, in order to prove the value of a programme. Ien Ang wrote in 1991 that the aim of "ratings discourse [is to] transform the audience from a notion that loosely represents an unknown and unseen reality, a *terra incognita,* into a known and knowable taxonomic category, a discrete entity that can be empirically described in numerical terms."[124] Ang argues that the reality is more complex, as audiences are not a system of static numbers. Audience studies as a discipline has always had to deal with the unpredictable and intangible nature of the audience. Ang continues with the notion that:

> 'Television audience' as constructed in audience measurement is an object that is made up of subjects. This leads to a fundamental

[124]Ang, *Desperately Seeking the Audience*, 56.

> instability of the category. As an object made up of subjects, 'television audience' is not a static, stone-like object whose characteristics can be described once and for all, but is a continually changing, dynamic object that always seems to elude definitive description. The fact that the production of ratings is an ongoing, never-ending practice testifies to this slipperiness: even the most factual, objective characteristics of 'television audience', its size and its composition, cannot be assumed constant, and have to be re-established again and again, day after day. Ratings are very fleeting products: they become obsolete almost instantly.[125]

Television audiences are, therefore, in a constant, evolving state of flux. This audience has always been 'imperfect', and "the control made possible by audience measurement is inevitably precarious and provisional."[126] So, there is a discrepancy between the rational industry construction and the unpredictable reality of audiences. Philip Napoli also identified this problem and addressed it in his book *Audience Evolution.* He presents a model, The Audience Marketplace, which demonstrates how the media industries sell advertisers the *predicted audience*[127] of a television programme, also known as the intended audience as discussed in Chapter One, based on what audiences similar programmes have attracted in the past. Once a programme has aired and ratings are calculated, broadcasters and advertisers know who the

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[125] Ibid., 61.

[126] Ibid., 8.

[127] Philip M. Napoli, *Audience Evolution: New Technologies and the Transformation of Media Audiences* (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 2011).

measured audience is, as this is the audience captured by the ratings system. Although audience measurement companies aim to be as precise as possible there is always a margin for error (Fig 1). The television industry, for all of its attempts to rationalise the television audience, is aware of this error. Ang, again, wrote that:

> It is common industry wisdom that it is *never* possible to predict the success or failure of a particular film or programme, despite all sorts of safety valves such as formulaic production … and market research. Here the … audience is associated rather frantically with its imputed fickleness, recalcitrance and unpredictability.[128]

This unpredictability is built into Napoli's model, as he incorporates a third circle, the *actual audience* of a programme.

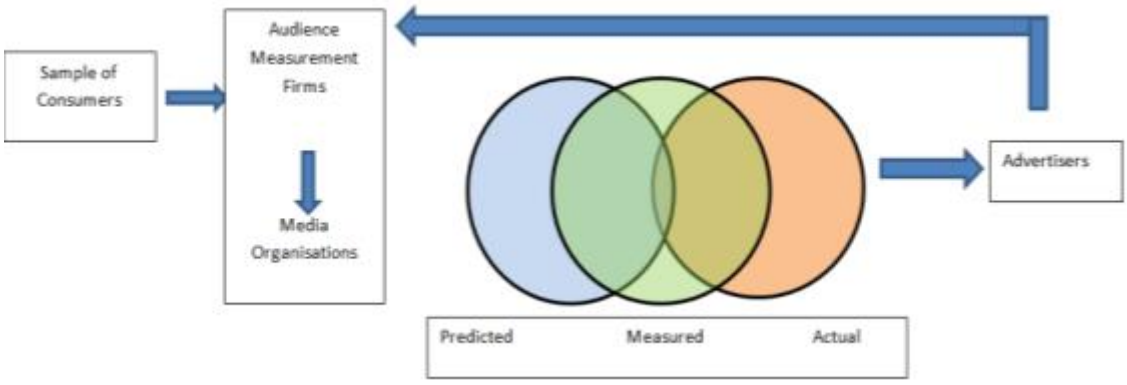


Figure 1 – The Audience Marketplace, Philip Napoli

[128]Ien Ang, *Living Room Wars : Rethinking Media Audiences for a Postmodern World* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 10.

Although audience measurement companies, broadcasters and advertisers have been trying to *know* their audience, this discrepancy between the *predicted*, *measured* and *actual* audience demonstrates that these predictions are never wholly accurate. The strict formula that constitutes socio-economic demographics does not directly correspond with individual tastes and preferences, only general trends. Outside of the *predicted* and *measured* audiences there are viewers of different, untargeted demographics engaging with programming not intended to appeal to them.

To label this audience the *actual* audience is still problematic, as it still suggests a homogenous mass of similar viewers. As Shaun Moores wrote, "there is no stable entity which we can isolate and identify as the media audience, no single object this is unproblematically 'there' for us to observe and analyse. The plural, audiences, is preferable."[129] Napoli is aware of this limitation with his own model, as he explains that his focus is on:

> the role and function of audiences within the economics of media industries…[which] is why the complex and multifaceted concept of the media audience can, within the context of the model presented here, be stripped down to the more basic and unidimensional concept of the audience product.[130]

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[129] Shaun Moores, *Interpreting Audiences: The Ethnography of Media Consumption*, (California: Sage Publications, 1993), pp1-2.

[130] Philip Napoli *Audience Economics: Media Institutions and the Audience Marketplace,* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003) pp22-23

Napoli accepts that as a concept the *actual audience* is simplistic, but it useful for his specific research.

As previously stated, Ang has argued that the concept of 'the audience' is an industry construct, but increasingly it has also become an audience construct. Lawrence Grossberg wrote in 1992 that:

> Audiences are constantly making their own cultural environment from the cultural resources that are available to them. Thus, audiences are not made up of cultural dupes; people are often quite aware of their own implication in structures of power and domination.[131]

Audiences themselves have been constructing their own ideas of what it means to be part of 'the audience' for years, but this has become more visible as audiences themselves have become more visible through technological advances and social media. This means it has become more obvious when the audience's construction of 'the audience' does not necessarily align with the industry's construction of 'the audience'. Alasuutari wrote in 1999 that "there isn't really such a thing as the 'audience' out there; one must bear in mind that audience is, most of all, a discursive construct produced by a particular analytical gaze".[132] As audiences have become more involved and aware in the

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[131] Lawrence Grossberg, "Is There a Fan in the House?: The Affective Sensibility of Fandom'," in *Adoring audiences: Fan Cultures and Popular Media,*, ed. Lisa A. Lewis (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 53.

[132] Pertti Alasuutari, *Rethinking the Media Audience the New Agenda* (London: Sage Pulications, 1999), 6.

media and industrial process, they have developed their own discursive gaze and their own construct of the audience. Alasuutari champions the use of the term 'audiencing' rather than 'audiences', because of this discursive nature, and Tulloch argues that "viewers are (no less than producers or researchers or moralists) constantly active in 'audiencing'".[133] Audiences themselves have become important contributors to the debates surrounding the construction of 'the audience',[134] and have started to actively engage with this debate to contribute terminology that also attempts to capture what 'the audience' actually is. Occasionally there is a discrepancy between who the television industry see as 'the audience', and who the audiences see as 'the audience', and a number of concepts and terms have been utilised to try and deal with this discrepancy.

To further complicate audience construction, the news media also has an important role in the construction of 'the audience'. As previously mentioned, the industry's construct of 'the audience' often differs to the reality of who is watching and interacting with a programme and is merely a discursive illusion. The news media can play a role in the formation of 'the audience' of a programme, not just through how they advertise and portray a media product[135], but also if and how they report on the audience of a programme.

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[133] John Tulloch, *Watching Television Audiences: Cultural Theories and Methods*, (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2000), 31.

[134] In the first case study, in Chapter 3, this becomes especially prevalent because the accidental audience, Bronies, identified and named themselves before they came to the attention of the media industries.

[135] Much scholarship has been written than focuses on how trailers and advertising campaigns can 'mislead' audiences about media products, and market the product to a

While the TV industry constructs 'the audience' for use within the media industries and audiences construct 'the audience' in order to place themselves within industrial frameworks, the news media constructs 'the audience' in order to portray them to the wider public. Fandoms, in particular, are often reported on in the mainstream press,[136] and the way these audiences are reported on influences' how the wider public, views them, and the discourses that circulate around them. Napoli writes that "participants in the audience marketplace deal primarily in measured audiences and only seldom confront in a meaningful way the question of whether the measured audience significantly corresponds to the actual audience." [137] This suggests that the television industry is concerned with the perceived audience of a programme more than the *actual audience* of a programme. The news media have influence over how the audience of a programme is perceived by the wider public. This public perception of an audience can influence how the media industries perceive this audience and the discourses that forms around it.[138] The television industry, academics and audiences do not exist in isolation of each other, they are

different audience than the product was produced for. A recent example would be the lawsuit brought again the 2011 film *Drive* (2011)http://www.theguardian.com/film/2011/oct/10/woman-sues-drive-trailer.

[136] Kristin M. Barton and Jonahan M. Lampley, *Fan Culture: Essays on Participatory Fandom in the 21st Century* (Jefferson: McFarland2013), 194.

[137] Philip Napoli, *Audience Economics: Media Institutions and the Audience Marketplace,* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003) pp 35

[138] As mentioned, this will be explored in more detail in Chapters 3 and 4, which deal with the accidental audiences of *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* and *Teletubbies.* In these examples the news media reported on certain behaviours of this audience that portrayed them negatively to the wider public and threatened the brand identities of both Hasbro and the BBC. While these corporations managed the news media construct of the audience different, they did both have to manage how these audiences were being reported in the news.

influencing each other, and the news media can also exude a level of influence over these institutions.

Napoli has, for the purpose of his model, condensed the *actual* audience into a single mass, which is overly simplistic. Within the *actual* audience of a programme there are still distinctions between who these viewers are. Grossberg states that "the audience of popular culture cannot be conceived of as a single homogenous entity; we have to take seriously the differences within and between the different fractions of the popular audience,"[139] and the same is true of the *actual audience.* If not all of the viewers are a part of the intended audience, and therefore do not all belong to the same demographic or psychographic category, then who does the *actual* audience consist of?

Identifying the Discrepancy

Various institutions have tried to answer this question and this has emerged through various names given to viewers who are a part of the *actual* audience but not the *intended* audience. In this section I will discuss and critique two concepts that have emerged from different discursive places that have been mobilised to try and capture something of audiences that are not intended. These concepts are the 'surplus audience', an academic term coined by Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green, which has also been utilised by the industry in certain situations, and 'periphery demographics', a fan term. While

[139] Grossberg, "Is There a Fan in the House?: The Affective Sensibility of Fandom'," 53.

these two terms refer to a very similar concept, the terminology utilised changes the connotative meanings, and points to the different ways the audience has be conceptualized.

Jenkins, Ford and Green created the term 'surplus audience' to describe audience members who are part of the *actual audience* but not the *intended audience.* They offer the definition of their term as audience "members outside the target demographic".[140] Many programmes attract a 'surplus audience', as the strict demarcations between demographic segments separates out audiences that can have overlapping and similar televisual tastes. To explain the 'surplus audience', Jenkins et al. utilise the example of soap opera viewers. They argue that while the broadcasters of US soap operas have an intended audience of women aged 18-34, the largest audience for the genre are women aged over 49, who have become 'veteran fans'. Their 'surplus audience' thereby refers to one that has 'aged out' of the broadcaster's target demographic, and were, at one point, the intended audience for the programme. Jenkins et al. only identify and examine one example of this 'surplus audience', so it is hard to determine if this is a characteristic of the term or this particular case study, but in this example Jenkins at al. make it clear that the demographic composition of a surplus audience is generally quite similar to that of the intended audience. These 'surplus audiences', those viewers who have spilled over the sides of the target demographic, can rarely

[140] Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 129.

"provide supplementary income through purchasing merchandise",[141] or be "seen as a nuisance [for] confusing advertisers about the media property's value for delivering targeted audience groups".[142] Jenkins et al. state that "they are often considered irrelevant"[143] and are ignored by the television industry.

Jenkins et al.'s terminology has also been taken up in certain industrial trade publications, including PR Press, released by PR Newswire. PR Newswire is a publication aimed at industrial professionals that describes themselves as the "premier global provider of multimedia platforms that enable marketers, corporate communicators, sustainability officers, public affairs and investor relations officers to leverage content to engage with all their key audiences".[144] When writing an article entitled *Strategies for PR Pros to Create Content That Has High Potential for 'Spreadability',* which focuses on how to maximise the use of branding and marketing, PR Press adopt Jenkins et al.'s term, writing that, "content that appeals to more than one target audience, both intended and surplus audiences, has greater meaning as spreadable media."[145] This implies that in this instance the 'surplus audience' is simply any audience that has not been specifically targeted yet, but because no more detail is given in the piece it is unknown if there are any specific parameters that apply when PR Press utilises this term within this context. The implication, nevertheless, does suggest that content creators should be encouraged to try and appeal to the

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[141] Ibid. 129.

[142] Ibid.

[143] Ibid.

[144] PR Newswire, 'Who we are'. 23rd January 2014, http://www.prnewswire.com/,

[145] PR News, Strategies for PR Pros to Create Content That Has High Potential for 'Spreadability', 25th Feb 2013

'surplus audience', and that they could be just as lucrative as intended audiences. In fact, the wording of the statement suggests that, if a 'surplus audience' is present it should become a target audience.

If we examine Jenkins et al.'s term semiotically, several connotations and implications become apparent which affect the nuance of the term and the assumptions made about the audience it describes. The specific use of the word 'surplus' gives the term a distinct economic focus, as a 'surplus' refers to an excess, it is what is left over after requirements have been met, and is generally considered a good thing in business.[146] In business a 'surplus' is also an expected outcome and there are often plans in place for either a surplus of product (when not all of a product is sold) or a budget surplus (when not all the money in the budget is spent). Due to the commonality of surpluses in business it is not often a surprise when one occurs and businesses know how to manage them quickly and efficiently. While this fits the definition Jenkins et al. provide, it also demonstrates that the term 'surplus audience' semantically suggests an economic and fiscal way of understanding audiences. The focus is on this audience's monetary worth, their value to the television industry, rather than the audience itself. The term, therefore, emerged out of an industry focussed

[146] There are occasions when a surplus can be viewed as a negative, such as when a manufacturer expects a product to be in high demand and therefore produces more than it sells during that time period; it can have a surplus inventory which may, if it's deep enough, create a financial loss. When the surplus is of a perishable commodity, such as grain, it could result in a permanent loss or a write-down as the inventory becomes bad. But this only occurs in specific circumstances, and refers to surplus of product rather than a budget surplus (or surplus of consumers which would increase demand for a product and therefore increase its fiscal value). Due to the way Jenkins uses surplus he is using it to refer to the audience, not the product, so these negative connotations do not apply in this circumstance.

context, where the audience is constructed and framed within a business model that is primarily concerned with economic and financial success.

Audience members themselves have, however, constructed an alternative way of conceptualising viewers who fall within the *actual audience* but not the *intended audience.* As previously mentioned, fans and audiences are becoming more self-aware of their own status and position within industrial frameworks, and have also begun to notice when they do not belong to the intended audience of a programme. This has resulted in fans developing their own terms to describe themselves and figure out how they fit into industrial strategies. The term I will discuss is "periphery demographics", which refers to a "notable bunch of audience members outside of the intended [i.e. predicted] demographic." [147] The term originated on *Television Tropes and Idioms,* an online database that collects descriptions and examples of various conventions and devices found within creative work*,* and has now been adopted by a number of different fan communities and appears in a number of fan discussion websites,[148] as well as the review website *Comic Vine*[149]*.* However, it only refers to large or notable audiences that all comprise of similar viewers from one demographic. That means that a programme could have an *actual*

[147] Anon, "Periphery Demographic", *Television Tropes and Idioms*, http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/PeripheryDemographic
The website uses the term 'intended', while Napoli uses 'predicted', but both refer to the audience that the product was created for and can be used interchangeably.
[148] Timothy Cerepaka, "The Peculiar Pleasures of Periphery Demographics", *Advanced Dorks and Deconstruction,* http://timothylcerepaka.wordpress.com/tag/periphery-demographic/ ; http://advanceddorksanddeconstruction.wordpress.com/2010/12/31/the-peculiar-pleasures-of-periphery-demographics/
[149] Ele3000, "Open Letter to Cartoon Network Regarding Your Demographics", *Comic Vine,* http://www.comicvine.com/profile/ele3000/blog/open-letter-to-cartoon-network-regarding-your-demo/95333/

audience that comprises of multiple periphery demographics that were not present in the *intended* audience.

In order to examine the term 'periphery demographics' and describe how it can operate, I will utilise two further examples from *Television Tropes and Idioms* to act as case studies. Both relate to content created for different age groups, specifically adults watching children's television content and children watching adults' television content, and are named 'what do you mean, it's for kids?'[150] And 'what do you mean, it's not for kids?'[151] While these two terms are relevant to the specific case studies I will explore later in the thesis, these terms also refer more broadly to audiences who significantly differ from the intended audience of a programme who engage with it regardless. These terms are useful because they demonstrate that the focus of the term 'periphery demographic' is on the relationship between the audiences and the texts. This is reinforced when we consider these terms in conjunction with Stuart Hall's theory of encoding, where the content creator *codes* meaning into the text they produce and the viewer *decodes* it by interpreting the content. However, because "meanings are always changing and slipping, codes operate more like social conventions than like fixed laws or unbreakable rules."[152] Due to the fact that meanings can change over time, different audiences are going to be interpreting programmes differently due to their own particular set of

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[150] Anon, "What do you mean its for kids?", *Televisi9on Tropes and Idioms,* http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/WhatDoYouMeanItsForKids

[151] Anon, "What do you mean its not for kids?", *Television Tropes and Idioms,* http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/WhatDoYouMeanItsNotForKids

[152] Hall, Stuart. *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices.*(London: Sage Publications, 1997). P45

references. An adult will decode and interpret the content differently to a child and will assign it different meanings, meaning it can appeal to them in a different way than it appeals to a child. The first term, 'what do you mean, it's for kids?', is defined as:

> Whenever a show or movie aimed toward younger viewers has a large enough Periphery Demographic, many of the older fans will vocally argue that it isn't a "kid's show", and become offended when anyone says it is. This is tied heavily to the idea that anything for kids must be crappy, or lack appeal to adults. [153]

This term is a result of the accidental audience of the programme arguing that it was intended for them and giving reasons why it is suitable for them and not the child audience it was produced for. The terminology refers to the response of adult fans when told the programme was not intended for them, and was instead created for a child audience. An example of this is the cartoon *Ren and Stimpy* (1991-1995), which included drug references and images, explicit violence and gore, often had unhappy episode endings but aired on Nickelodeon alongside *Rugrats* (1991-2004) and *Doug* (1991-1999).

The second term, 'what do you mean, it's not for kids?' is the reverse, when programmes are made for adult audiences, but for varying reasons audiences believe it is suitable for children. The webpage describes this thought process

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[153] Anon, "What do you mean it's for kids?", *Television Tropes and Idioms,* http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/WhatDoYouMeanItsForKids

with the statement that "All fantasy, space operas, fairy tales, everything with talking animals, anything with a child or girl as the protagonist, superhero movies, Comic Books, and animation is okay for kids... right?"[154] regardless of the themes or content of such programmes. An example of this is the 1978 animated film *Watership Down.* Based on the 1972 novel, the film's main characters were rabbits, but it included violence, murder, and unsettling themes. The BBFC (British Board of Film Classification) rated the film as 'U' (suitable for all) despite the violence, because of the film's happy ending. However, the BBFC has admitted to receiving complaints about the rating of the film every year since its release,[155] as parents say their children have found aspects of the film very upsetting. This highlights the common genres and styles of programme what are mistakenly thought of as being designed solely for child audiences, demonstrating one of the ways in which certain audiences, such as parents and older adults, believe that genres appeal to certain demographics rather than certain tastes.

Both of these terms offer an insight into how periphery demographics is a term used to understand a misalignment between the intended and actual audiences and how audiences attempt to deal with the discrepancies that often arise between what the broadcaster and creator believes is suitable or desired by their audience, and what the audience believes is suitable or desirable for

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[154] Anon, "What do you mean its not for kids?", *Television Tropes and Idioms,* http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/WhatDoYouMeanItsNotForKids

[155] Catherine Anderson, "A Repressive Rabbit Regime", *BBFC*, http://www.bbfc.co.uk/_featured/2012/04/from-the-archive-viewing-a-repressive-rabbit-regime/

themselves. They are concerned with looking at the relationships that form between audiences and media products, as the focus of the terms is on examining how different media can be consumed and enjoyed by different audiences.

If we examine the term 'periphery demographics' semiotically it becomes even more apparent that fans' perception of audiences outside the intended audience differs significantly from Jenkins et al.'s. Firstly, there is the use of the term 'periphery', which refers 'to the outside edge of an area' or 'the area that surrounds a place or thing'. This suggests that this audience seems themselves as on the outside and not as members of the 'mainstream'. There are also limitations with the term 'peripheral', because the term implies something 'on the edge', something that is not central or important. It has connotations of being superficial, irrelevant or fleeting. It can also be defined as "a marginal or secondary position in, or aspect of, a group, subject, or sphere of activity",[156] which implies a hierarchy within the television audience, with the targeted demographic being more important than the peripheral demographic. A 'peripheral' is also something that is generally normal,[157] so again it suggests that 'peripheral demographics' are an expected part of the television landscape. The use of the word 'demographic' is also important to analyse, as it demonstrates that audiences are aware of industry strategies, such as appealing to niche markets and specific demographic segments. Not only are audiences aware of these strategies and terms, they are also adopting this

[156] "Periphery," Oxford Dictionaries, https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/periphery.
[157] In a large group there will always have to be someone on the outside, on the periphery.

language themselves and using it to situate themselves with existing industrial structures and frameworks. This term is then continuously recirculated, so audiences begin to perceive themselves as being part of specific demographics because that is how they are presented.

Furthermore, peripheral demographics as a term is concerned with dealing with the relationships between audiences, media industries, meanings, and materials, rather than the economic or fiscal value of the audience. As demonstrated in 'What do you mean, it's for kids?', audiences focus on how and why they engage with media that was not intended them. As a term, surplus audience focuses on how these audiences can be seen by the television industry, and their monetary value, while periphery demographics are concerned with the relationship between audiences and meanings within texts. It is important to analyse these two terms because they demonstrate that the way the audience is being conceived is bleeding across these three spaces: academic, industrial and fan. The television industry is utilising academic terms, and audiences are using industry terms in an attempt to understand, classify and identify who the audience is.[158] The differences between these two terms also demonstrate the differences between how viewers constitute a part of the

[158] This becomes especially apparent when the website Television Tropes and Idioms is explored in further detail. It is a fan created and run website that is concerned with identifying, explaining and categorising common narrative strategies within media. The existence of this website demonstrates that fans and audience members are incredibly aware of how stories are constructed and told, and how the media industries operate. The website uses industry terminology alongside fan named concepts. However, *Television Tropes and Idioms* is also used by the media industries. Creator Dan Harmon is a confirmed reader of the website (https://twitter.com/danharmon/status/326655793745920), demonstrating that fan concepts are also bleeding back into the industry.

actual audience but not the *intended audience* can be conceptualised and viewed.

These terms emerged out of differing discursive places, and both have value, but both operate within specific contexts and refer to very specific audiences. I will argue that a more useful way of conceptualising viewers that are part of the *actual,* but not the *intended* audience is by positioning them within the framework of the 'accidental audience'.

The Accidental Audience

I argue that the best way to being to understand the discrepancies and complexities of the television audience is through the model of the *accidental audience.* If we analyse the term 'accidental audience' semantically, its value and flexibility becomes apparent. As previously mention, the terms 'surplus audience' and 'periphery demographics' have specific connotations that effect how the audience they are used to describe can be perceived. In comparison, the term accidental audience is more flexible with the connotations it projects on the audience it refers to. The term 'accidental', can be defined as 'happening by chance, unintentionally, or unexpectedly'. This means that it was not planned for, nor expected, like a surplus audience or a periphery demographic, and it was a surprise to the television industry. An accident can also be described as 'an event that happens by chance or that is without apparent or deliberate cause', which emphasises the idea that this audience was not

deliberately targeted, and that the reason this audience forms around this programme may not be immediately apparent.[159] It also implies that there was no deliberate plan to target this audience, so a plan needs to be formed in order to manage them. Unlike the typical context, when the media industries would have created a plan for managing their audience before a product is released, in this context the audience has already formed and begun to interact with the product. This results in the industry needing to construct a responsive management strategy, rather than a pre-emptive management strategy.

The term 'accidental audience' also lacks connotations about its size or importance. While a surplus can be large or small, something on the periphery is always unimportant. An accident, on the other hand, can be large or small, important or unimportant; it has more flexibility and can be used in a broader range of contexts. An accidental audience, unlike a periphery demographic, can become more important than the intended demographic because it is not relegated to the side-lines, or the outside, of the *actual audience.* In the case of the 'accidental audience', the term 'audience' is preferable because an accidental audience can be formed of multiple different demographics.

Ang develops this argument, writing that "the attention given to demographic composition of the audience does not alter this is any essential sense: it only

[159] This idea will be further explored in the case studies, especially the chapter concerned with *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* and Bronies, as the media was very interested in the reasons *why* this programme had attracted this particular audience of adult men, because it differed so significantly from the media generally produced with this target demographic in mind.

breaks down the total audience into separate slices of audience that are, each of them, in turn imagined as countable entities."[160] This means that the use of a term such as 'demographics' would be limiting and place connotations that the accidental audience is formed of viewers who are exactly the same. Ang also writes that:

> By concentrating so heavily on differentiating between groups of viewers, academic communication researchers are driven toward drawing 'fictions' of rigid, reified audience categories, a kind of knowledge that forecloses understanding of the concrete practices and experiences of people because those 'fictions' are regarded as reflecting essential viewer identities that are taken to sufficiently explain certain patterns of 'viewing behaviour'.[161]

As explored when discussing 'periphery demographics', the term demographic is mostly used to categorize viewers by their age (as this is how ratings are reported in news media) which, as Ang argues, leads to 'fictions' around what behaviours and tastes these demographic segments exhibit. While the specific case studies that will be examined in this thesis do focus on age specific accidental audiences, this is not always the case. Even within some of the case studies the accidental audience is multifaceted.[162] The use of the word 'audience' therefore grants the framework a level of flexibility to allow it to be

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[160] Ang, *Desperately Seeking the Audience*, 60.

[161] Ibid., 159.

[162] This will be apparent in Chapter 3 when I discuss the gender of Bronies, and incredibly important in Chapter 5, when I discuss the 'aged-up' audience of *Sesame Street,* which exists within the programme's accidental adult audience.

utilised in different contexts and in relation to different audiences that may comprise of a mix of different demographics.

Both 'surplus' and 'peripheral' also suggest a static state, as you do not have to manage something that is a surplus or exists in the periphery. However, an accident demands a reaction, regardless of whether it was fortunate or unfortunate, it needs to be managed. This is an important distinction, because as stated before, audiences are not fixed numbers, they are fluid and ever changing, so they continually need to be managed and reacted to by the industry, and the term accidental audience reflects this need.

It is, nevertheless, important to define what can constitute an audience, as it will affect what can constitute an *accidental audience.* While the accidental audience exists as part of the *actual* audience, it does not constitute the entirety of the *actual* audience. There will also be a number of unconnected viewers who do not consist of the *intended* or the *accidental* audience watching a programme. These unconnected viewers are present in almost every type of programming and are expected, to a certain expect, by the television industry. However these unconnected viewers are often deemed unimportant, as James Ettema and Charles Whitney note that individual viewers "do not exist in an institutional conception of mass communication" and only "institutionally effective audiences" are granted meaning or value by the television industry.[163] John Ellis expands on this, arguing that:

[163] James S. Ettema, and D. Charles Whitney. *Audiencemaking: How the Media Create the Audience.* (London: Sage Publications, 1994.) P5

> For 'audience' is a profoundly ideological concept, that has very little to do with what viewers are doing or how they are interpellated. Broadcasting institutions are not concerned with 'viewers', but they are with 'audience'. Viewers are individuals…. Audiences are bulk agglomerations created by statistical research, they 'belong' to income groups and are endowed with a few broad educational and cultural features. Audiences do not use TV, they watch it and consume it. Broadcasting institutions do not seek viewers, they seek audiences.[164]

Audiences are, therefore, of more concern to the television industry than viewers. We must then consider what criteria must be fulfilled for a group of viewers to be classified as an audience. In order for an accidental audience to be an audience, rather than a group of accidental viewers, there are a number of conditions they must fulfil. Ang writes about the traditional way audiences have been defined, writing that:

> Due to the messy status of the notion of audience in everyday language, an audience is routinely defined in terms of its most obvious empirical manifestation, i.e. a collection of spectators, a group of individuals who are gathered together to attend a performance and 'receive' a message 'sent' by another… In other words, it would be what Ron Harré (1981) has called a 'taxonomic collective': an entity of serialized, in principle unrelated individuals

[164] John Ellis, "Channel 4: Working Notes," *Screen* 24, no. 6 (1983): 49.

> who form a group solely because each member has a characteristic – in our case, spectatorship – that is like that of each other member.[165]

Using Ang's definition, the *accidental audience*, to be defined as an audience, must simply watch a television programme. However after considering Napoli's model and examining the multiple ways 'the audience' can be constructed, this definition becomes too simplistic. Virginia Nightingdale argues that the best way to define an audience is through its relations. She presents four qualities she deems particularly important for the conceptualisation of an audience using this method. For the conceptualisation of the accidental audience one is particularly useful to consider.[166] The concept is that "audience relations always involve the exercise of power – someone always has the power to offer 'audience' and someone else must respond by accepting or rejecting that offer."[167] If we consider this it suggests that for an accidental audience to exist the television industry must be aware of them, so the industry must firstly see the unexpected viewers as an audience in order for those viewers to become an accidental audience. Due to fact that the model of the accidental audience

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[165] Ang, *Desperately Seeking the Audience*, 33.

[166] Nightingdale's further qualities are that "Consumption and use are necessary but not sufficiently explanations of audience relations", that "audience relations are what I will call… 'operational', and their operationalism is linked to the power structures which govern the relation. In the audience-text relation this operationalism encompasses the transformation of the heterogeneous, haphazard particularity of the everyday into personal narratives which conform to generic cultural ideals." And "audience relationships are based on symbiotic interactions". These qualities refer more to the audience's relationship with the text. While this thesis is concerned with audience, it is not an audience studies piece, so these relations are less useful to the aim of this thesis.

[167] Virginia Nightingale, *Studying Audiences : The Shock of the Real* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 149-50.

is to understand how the television industry manages unexpected viewers of their programmes, it is integral that the television industry has a role in the creation of the accidental audience and fulfils these criteria alongside their audience.

The Framework

If we return to Napoli's *Audience Marketplace*, we can begin to formulate the framework of the *accidental audience*. Firstly, Napoli is approaching his diagram from an economic perspectiveand includes a lot of information which is superfluous when focussing specifically on audiences rather than industrial

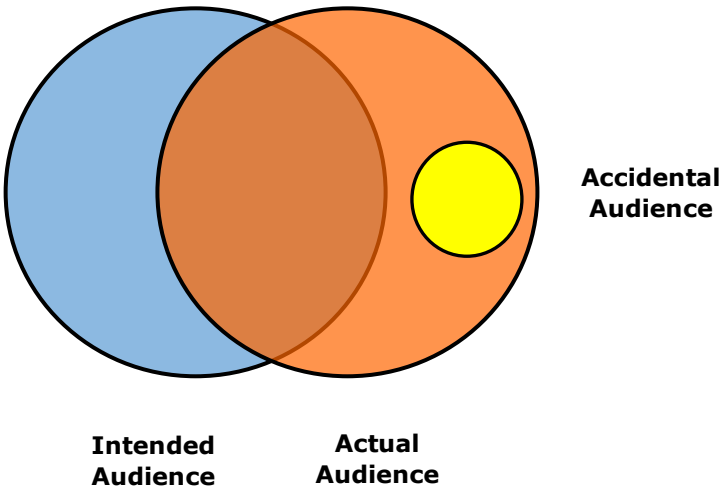


Figure 2 – The position of the accidental audience within the actual, but not the intended, audience

contexts. This means that, for this thesis' purpose, his diagram can be streamlined. As the accidental audience deals with the discrepancy between *intended* and *actual* audiences, these are the most relevant aspects of Napoli's diagram, and therefore the aspects that are needed. The accidental audience

exists within the *actual* audience of a programme, but not the *intended* audience. So it would map onto the diagram as shown in figure 2.

As this diagram demonstrates, the accidental audience exists as part of the *actual* audience. It does not constitute the entirety of the *actual* audience, as there will also be individuals who do not consist of the *intended* or the *accidental* audience watching a programme. For an accidental audience to form the television industry must take note of these viewers and perceive them as an audience. An accident, however, is not a static event; it must be managed. Therefore an accidental audience can only exist for a short amount of time, as they way in which the television industry responds to it will transform the accidental audience into a different kind of audience. An accident is either serendipitous or unfortunate and the television industry is disposed to perceive an accidental audience as being either serendipitous or unfortunate. There are two main ways an accidental audience can be managed, which results in them transforming into either an *absorbed* audience or a *denied* audience.

Absorbed and Denied Audiences

As soon as the television industry becomes aware of their accidental audience, a management strategy must be developed and utilised. This management can occur in a variety of different ways and take various forms, which will be explored in each of the following case studies, but the framework is consistent. After an accidental audience is identified and the industry's disposition towards this audience is positive, it can decide it wants to capitalise on this accidental

audience. The industry then incorporates the accidental audience into the intended audience, resulting in it transforming into an *absorbed* audience (Fig 3). In this case the aim of the management strategy is integration of the accidental audience into the intended audience.

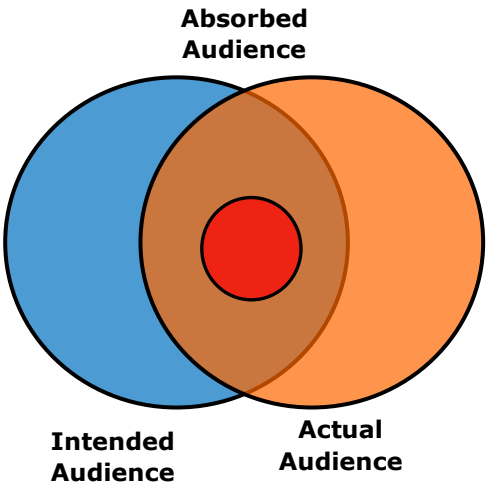


Figure 3 – The positioning of the absorbed audience within both the actual and intended audience.

This results in accidental audience being absorbed into the *intended* audience, while retaining its position in the *actual* audience of a programme, so the result is an *absorbed* audience. Two of the case studies this thesis will explore *absorbed* audiences, the adult male fans of *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* (2014-) known as Bronies were absorbed by Hasbro and adult fans of *Sesame Street* (1969-) were absorbed by the Children's Television Workshop.

The second outcome occurs when the television industry's disposition towards the accidental audience is negative. In this case the result of the television industry becoming aware of an accidental audience is a *denied* audience (Fig 4). In this case the accidental audience is unwanted by the television industry

and their aim is to stop the accidental audience interactions with the programme, so the management strategy focuses on discouragement. The television industry can choose this strategy for a number of different reasons; the accidental audience could threaten the brand identity of a programme or channel, it could confuse advertisers and sponsors etc. Some of these reasons will be explored in more depth in the chapter detailing the BBC's decision to discourage the accidental student audience of *Teletubbies* (1997-2001), resulting in them becoming a *denied* audience. In this model the circle representing the *denied* audience is smaller than the circles representing the *accidental* and *absorbed* audiences. This is because, due to the actions taken by the television industry, it can become harder for this audience to operate, and some members of this audience may stop engaging with the programme. The audience does not entirely disappear because some members may continue to watch the programme and therefore remain members of the *actual* audience. This is why this audience is not an *abolished* or *eradicated*

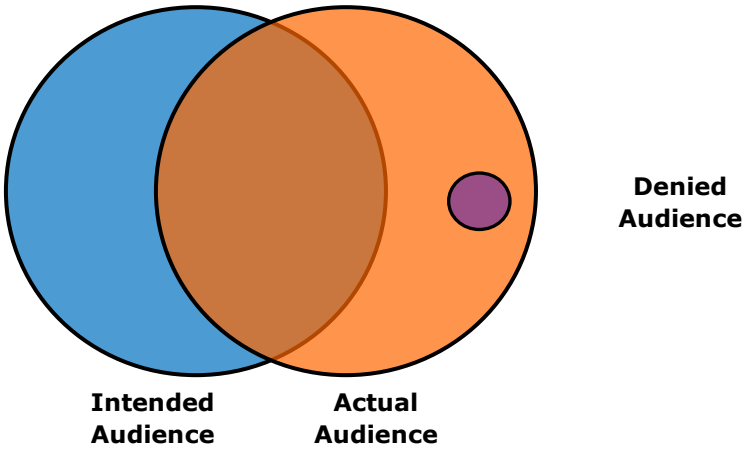


Figure 4 – The positioning of the denied audience within the actual, but not the intended, audience. Note its smaller size.

audience, because while it may be the television industry's intent, *denied*

audience members can endure the discouragement process and continue to engage with the programme.

It is important to remember that, again, the *absorbed* and *denied* audiences are not static audiences. They are created through industrial management tactics and strategies. These processes can be designed with the aim of absorbing the accidental audience, or denying them, but this process is often lengthy and convoluted.[168] Even after the television industry has decided which outcome they prefer, denying or absorbing their accidental audience, the strategy they implement remains a process without a definitive end. That is why the model of the *denied* audience shows that it can remain as a part of the *actual audience* of a programme, because this is a process where the audience needs to be continually managed.

When the model is shown in its entirety (Fig 5) it becomes apparent that the accidental audience remains in flux, as the result of the industry's management strategy does not result in a static audience. This can be because the management strategies used by the television industry were ineffective (for example, a *denied* audience still interacting with the programme or an absorbed audience no longer interacting with the programme) or because the management strategies used by the industry change depending on the

[168] This will be explored in more detail in Chapter 5, which deals with *Sesame Street.* Due to the programme's long history the management strategies have changed and developed over time and at some points the Children's Television Workshop (CTW) has been in the process of 'denying' the accidental adult audience and at others the CTW has focussed on 'absorbing' this audience.

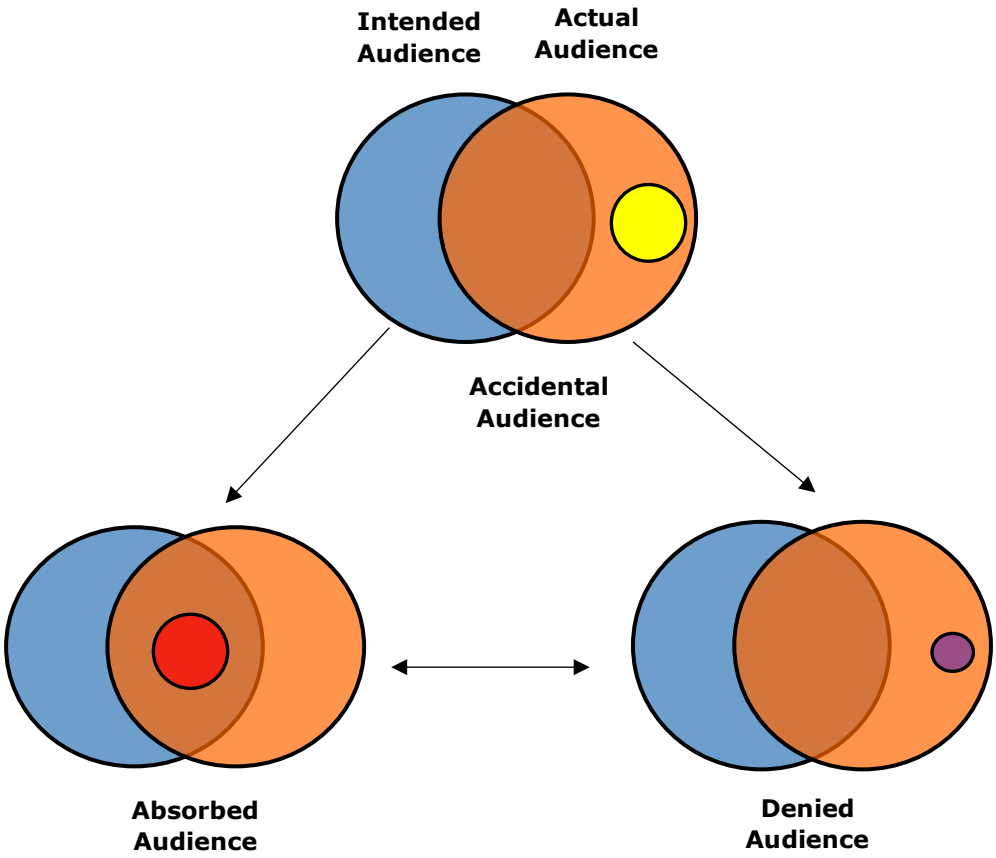


Figure 5 - The Accidental Audience Model

circumstances and context. The framework allows flexibility in the use of double headed arrows, which show how approaches to managing accidental audiences can change and how an accidental audience can fluctuate between these different states. This will become more apparent in the final case study, *Sesame Street* (1969-), where the Children's Television Workshop has, over its history, changed how it has managed its accidental audience.

The value of the model of the *accidental audience* is that the inherent instability and changeability of both television audiences and television industries has been taken into account and built into the model. After an *accidental audience* is identified and managed it transforms into either an *absorbed* or a *denied* audience. Importantly they are not confined to these

outcomes. Personnel and contexts within the industry can change, so the strategies used to manage these audiences can evolve. The audiences themselves can also resist the management of the television industries, forcing the industry to implement a new strategy. The model allows for these situations by including the double ended arrow to demonstrate that audiences can fluctuate between being *absorbed* and *denied* depending on a variety of different factors.

Conclusion

This chapter has presented the model of the *accidental audience* as a way of understanding audiences that engage with programming that was not created for them. It has demonstrated that the simplistic, numerical construct of the audience created by the ratings system and used by the industry is unrealistic, and that the reality of the television audience is both messy and complex. Academics have identified this and tried to construct the audience in a way that compensates for their multifaceted nature and the deficiencies of the industrial framework. Napoli uses his diagram of The Audience Marketplace to begin to position the problematic audience within the industrial context and identifies a number of different audiences, including the *predicted* and *actual* audience, and the discrepancy between the two. This created a space where viewers who engaged with programmes that were not created or intended for them could be visualised. Audiences themselves have also become aware of industrial frameworks and have begun to construct their own meanings of what it means

to be a part of an 'audience' and have become active in the debates around audiences.

As a result of the complex interplay of issues this chapter has examined two terms which refer to a similar concept as that of the *accidental audience,* but these have limitations and connotations. The 'surplus audience' and 'periphery demographics' demonstrate the different ways audiences are now being conceptualised but both academic/industry and audience members themselves. They also demonstrate how the industry, academics and audiences are all influencing each other, as terminology is bleeding across. This interplay justifies a 'clean' term that can move freely without such additional meaning.

The term *accidental audience* was then introduced and interrogated and I argued that it was a more useful term to use when describing viewers that form part of the *actual* audience but not the *intended* audience, because of the lack of connotation associated with the specific words used and the flexibility it allows. The framework was then introduced, which detailed how depending on how the industry managed the *accidental audience* it could be transformed into either an *absorbed audience,* when the industry wanted to capitalise on this audience, or the *denied audience,* when the industry wanted to discourage this audience. These terms are not fixed, as depending on changing contexts these audiences can oscillate between the terms.

This thesis will now go on to apply this framework to three different case studies to demonstrate how it works. It will be applied to Bronies, the adult

male fans of *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* (2014-) to demonstrate how an *accidental audience* can be transformed into an *absorbed audience.* Secondly it will be applied to the student aged *accidental audience* of *Teletubbies* (1997-2001), to show how a *denied audience* can be achieved, and why the industry would choose to discourage an audience from engaging with their programme. Finally, the model will be applied to the adult *accidental audience* of *Sesame Street* (1969-), to demonstrate how the audience can fluctuate between being *absorbed* and *denied* over time depending on a variety of different factors.

Chapter Three

My Little Absorbed Audience:
Bronies, Hasbro and Friendship is Magic

This chapter contains the first of three case studies exploring different accidental audiences. These case studies aim to answer three main questions: 1) how do accidental audiences form and become visible to the industry? 2) Does the industry respond by transforming this audience into either an absorbed or a denied audience? 3) What methods do the television industry use to accomplish this? Each of the following case studies occur in a differing context in order to examine a range of possible outcomes.

The first accidental audience case study is the unexpected adult male audience of *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* (*MLP:FIM,* 2010-), known as 'Bronies'. The Brony audience consists of men, aged from their late teens to their mid-forties,[169] who self-identify as fans of *MLP:FIM.* Bronies are a conspicuous example of an accidental audience; they are not only different in age to *MLP:FIM's* target audience, but also differ in their gender profile to the programme's intended audience of 2 – 11 year old girls. Bronies also constitute a large, vocal online audience. This had garnered Bronies a significant degree of media attention, making them increasingly visible to Hasbro, the creators of

[169]Una LaMarche, "Pony up Haters: How 4chan Gave Birth to the Bronies." *Observer Business & Tech*, 9th August 2011. http://observer.com/2011/08/pony-up-haters-how-4chan-gave-birth-to-the-bronies/.

the *My Little Pony* franchise (MLP)[170], and in this case study the company that took responsibility for managing the Brony audience.

In order to explore this audience, this chapter will contain three main sections. The first will establish the cultural history of MLP as a franchise that dates back to the 1980s. In order to situate *MLP:FIM* as the current incarnation of MLP it is necessary to first establish the cultural history of the franchise. There are a number of factors that inform the brand identity of *MLP:FIM;* including the brand identity of Hasbro, the cultural reception of pony focussed media, the franchise history, and the television channel it aired on The Hub (renamed the *Discovery Family Channel* on the 13th October 2014). This section will examine all these components in order to analyse how MLP decided on its intended audience and how it was specifically designed to appeal to this audience, originally as a toy line and later as a set of media products. The second section will follow the development of the Brony audience, and track the audience's growth from its first appearance on an internet forum. This section will begin to explore how the internet aids in the development and formation of accidental audiences. Whereas previously viewers outside of a target demographic often remained isolated, the internet provides spaces where they can congregate and transform themselves into a more distinct audience constituency. As a result, the internet can bring accidental, and hitherto undiscovered, audiences to the attention of the media industry. Although

[170] In order to avoid confusion between the My Little Pony franchise and the My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic television series, the franchise will be shortened and referred to as MLP, and the television programme will be shortened and referred to as *MLP:FIM*

audiences existed before the internet, there is now a multitude of ways they can share their content online and operate on a larger, more visible scale, and the consequences of this will be explored in later sections. The third section of the chapter will look at the moment when Hasbro became aware of the Brony audience and the management strategies they used to transform their accidental audience into an absorbed audience. It will explore how Hasbro tried to manage public opinion of Bronies so they would not conflict with Hasbro's family brand identity and how they monetised the newly absorbed Brony audience.

The Cultural History of the My Little Pony Franchise

The My Little Pony franchise has proven to be a lasting success for Hasbro, producing toys, video games, books, films and television programmes. This first section will explore the history of the MLP franchise and how it was designed to appeal to its specific intended audience of girls aged 2 – 11 years old. Franchising is a cultural and economic system of licensing products across different platforms, as Derek Johnson writes "the idea of media franchising had clearly become cultural shorthand for understanding the expansion of cultural production across different media and industry sectors."[171] Consequently, this chapter will see the MLP aesthetic, characters and narrative not as being limited to a single medium, but rather spread across different platforms that

[171]Derek Johnson. *Media Franchising: Creative License and Collaboration in the Culture Industries.* (New York: New York University Press, 2013) p27.

results in “a coordinated system in which multiple profit centres worked under a shared brand name”.[172] Even if a MLP game or video is being produced by a company other than Hasbro, all MLP products share the same brand identity.

MLP was developed by Hasbro, which was created in 1923 as a textile company that specialised in pencil cases and school supplies. From its inception Hasbro (then known as Hassenfeld) created products for children and by the late 1930s the company had branched out into creating toys, the first of which being doctor and nurse kits. By 1942 Hasbro had primarily become a toy company and in 1952 they released Mr. Potato Head, the first toy ever to be advertised on television. This began Hasbro’s long relationship with television tie-ins and transmedia characters and in 1954 they became a major licensee for producing Disney toys. Hasbro had become a successful company that specialised in children’s toys and had branched out into affiliating with other children’s media companies. This would become solidified when, according to author Marvin Kaye, the company conceived G.I. Joe in 1963 when a licensing agent suggested a merchandise tie-in with a television program about the U.S. Marine Corps called *The Lieutenant* (1963-64). The company liked the idea of a military doll, but did not want to pin its fate on a TV show that might prove short-lived. As such it created its own concept, and in 1964 Hasbro unveiled G.I. Joe, a foot-high action figure with articulated joints. In its first two years, G.I. Joe brought in between $35 and $40 million and accounted for nearly two-thirds of the

[172] Ibid.

company's total sales[173]. While G.I Joe was discontinued in 1969 due to the American public's disillusionment with the Vietnam War and growing disapproval with war-themed toys, it was revived in 1982 and was shortly followed by the highly successful Transformers toy franchise. Both of these franchises were targeted at boys. It is from within this context that Hasbro looked to develop a new franchise that would appeal more immediately to girls and decided to create toys based on horses.

There is a long pre-history of girls being culturally associated with horses. While initially utilised as working animals, and associated with men and boys, the post-WWI period and development of the motor car meant that horses were soon relegated to the realms of the past, and to hobbies, within the popular imagination. It was in this period that the rise of the female-centric 'pony stories' cemented the relationship between little girls and ponies.[174] By the 1930s many different publishers and authors worked in this genre, as Mary Cadogan and Patricia Craig remark, "the odd tendency of certain young girls to identify strongly with horses has provided a profitable fictional theme".[175] The popularity of these early pony stories, largely published for a middle-class, pony-owning readership, led to the expansion of the genre. Alison Haymonds explains, "the female heroes of pony books created new social and psychological patterns for girls," whose "life with ponies was a trial run for the

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[173] Marvin Kaye, *A Toy Is Born* (New York: Stein and Day, 1973), 190.

[174] Jenny Kendrick, "Riders, Readers, Romance: A Short History of the Pony Story," *Jeunesse: Young People, Texts, Cultures* 1, no. 2 (2009): 184.

[175] Mary Cadogan and Patricia Craig, *You're a Brick, Angela!: The Girls' Story 1839-1985* (London: Gollancz, 1986), 403.

sort of life post-war women had to learn to cope with, juggling relationships, responsibilities, work, and family".[176] So, pony stories had started to focus on young, female protagonists, and attract a predominantly young, female audience. In their book *Fair Girls and Grey Horses,* pony fiction authors Josephine, Christine, and Diana Pullein-Thompson argue that in the 1940s these female protagonists were designed to offer good role models, writing that:

> We became convinced that skill, courage and determination could triumph over almost anything and we tried to pass this on in our books. . . .Certainly our heroines were always equal and sometimes superior to the boys; they might suffer from doubts and indecision but by the last page their courage, patience and talent were rewarded.[177]

Pony fiction had reached its peak in terms of readership size in the 1940s and 1950s, although Kendrick argues that the "whilst the quality may not be what it was, the market seems fairly robust".[178] Indeed, pony stories are still available through online retailers in large numbers. This meant that when Hasbro was trying to design a toy line that would appeal to girls, ponies seemed

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[176] Alison Haymonds, "Rides of Passage," in *A Necessary Fantasy? The Heroic Figure in Children's Popular Culture*, ed. Dudley Jones and Tony Watkins (New York: Garland, 2000), 52-53.

[177] Christine Pullein-Thompson, Diana Pullein-Thompson, and Josephine Pullein-Thompson, *Fair Girls and Grey Horses* (London: Allison & Busby, 2014), 329-30.

[178] Kendrick, "Riders, Readers, Romance: A Short History of the Pony Story," 188.

like a logical choice as there was already a cultural tradition of creating pony focussed content and products for girls.

My Little Pony Franchise

The result of this decision was the 1981 release of the My Pretty Pony toys, Hasbro's female orientated products designed to complement the male orientated Transformers and GI Joe. These were 10 inch tall pony figurines (see Fig. 6) that were designed by illustrator Bonnie Zacherle.



Figure 6 – Drawing of a My Pretty Pony from the original patent application.

In 1982, Zacherle moved to work for Hasbro directly and My Pretty Pony was reduced in size, re-designed and re-released as My Little Pony. The popularity of MLP quickly overtook that of My Pretty Pony, which was discontinued after its 1981 line was sold out. Although the adjective used to describe the ponies' changed, from 'pretty' to 'little', the use of the word 'pony' is relevant. As a signifier,[179] the word horse conjures thoughts of a powerful, working animal, with no strong gender affiliation. The word pony denotes a smaller and more

[179]Ferdinand De Saussure and Wade Baskin, *Course in General Linguistics* (Columbia University Press, 2011).

delicate, or cute, animal that is strongly affiliated with girls. While there are no differences between horses and ponies other than size, this language choice meant that Hasbro was immediately utilising pre-conceived impressions to affiliate their product with, and market it at, a young female audience.

The first official generation of My Little Pony was released in 1982, and continued being sold in the United States until 1992 (and was marketed internationally until 1995). The first toys released were named Earth Ponies, and were followed by Pegasus Ponies, Unicorn Ponies, Flutter Ponies and Sea Ponies (Fig 7.). The only difference between the toys was their colour schemes and slight design changes. For example sea ponies were coloured in greens and blues, while unicorn ponies had horns. Nevertheless, they were all the same size and shared a general design.



Figure 7 – A generation 1 Unicorn Pony

As the ponies could not talk, the designers utilised a visual vocabulary to portray information about the toys: Ponies were generally coloured in pastel colours, pinks, yellows and light blues, with colourful manes and tails, and

beauty marks on each side. These were often hearts, rainbows, stars and flowers. The lashes of the ponies were emphasised, with two above and below each eye. These gendered signifiers gave them a feminine appearance. These stereotypical attributes were used to quickly identify the toys as female and ensured that even if viewed in isolation from all marketing, promotional and packaging, the ponies would still be gendered female.

The characters were predominantly female in all of the MLP toy lines. This was because Hasbro believed young girls would more readily identify with female characters and also reinforced the cultural view that ponies were affiliated with females. *Sea Ponies* were released in both 'adult' and 'baby' forms, strengthening the assumption that the relationship between girls and horses had a maternal, and thus feminine, aspect. Each pony toy also came with a ribbon and a comb, which could be used to brush the mane and tail of the toy. Hasbro produced and marketed the toys with a focus on their physical appearance, so the first generation of MLP was associated with feminine activities that revolved around beauty and hairstyles. It can be said with some certainty that the first generation was specifically marketed towards girls. The ponies themselves were female and imbued with feminine markers to strongly link the brand identity with young girls through content, and the context of other toys on the market.

Generation 1 started with the release of six pony toys in 1982, but the toy line quickly became a financial success for Hasbro and became a highly recognizable part of popular culture. Along with the release of extra lines, such as cuddly

versions of the toys called the So-Soft Ponies, and Twinkle-Eyed Ponies which had rhinestones in their eyes, a line of McDonald's happy meal toys (Fig. 8) were released.



Figure 8 – Generation 1 Happy Meal Toys

Generation 1 also included transmedia extensions, as the toy line spawned a series of cartoon releases. Firstly, two television specials were released in 1984 and 1985, titled *Rescue at Midnight Castle* (also known as *Rescue from Midnight Castle* and *Firefly's Adventure*) and *Escape From Catrina*, were both released under the Uc rating (Universal Children) in the UK, demonstrating that they were suitable for very young viewers. The cast of these specials was comprised mainly of female characters and voice actors, again reinforcing the brand identity that MLP was a product designed for, and suitable for, young girls to enagage with.

These television specials were followed by MLP's first, and currently only, theatrical film release. *My Little Pony: The Movie* (Fig. 9) was released on the 6th of August 1986, to negative reviews and a disappointing box-office gross (a mere $6million).[180]

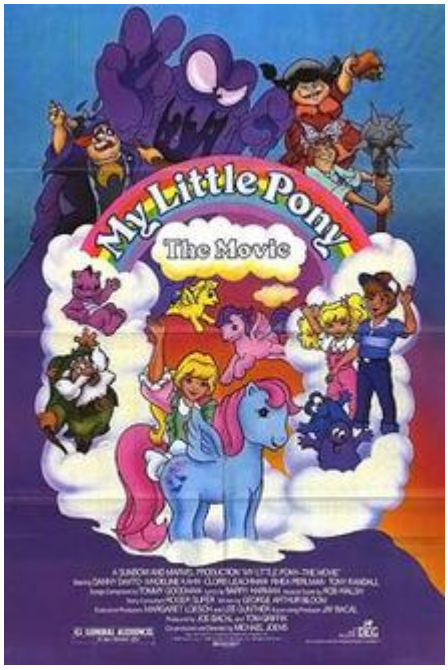


Figure 9 – My Little Pony: The Movie film poster

This commercial failure led to Hasbro refocussing on the MLP toy line and cartoon series, and shying away from big-budget theatre releases. Despite MLP failing as a theatrical release, it continued to find success as a television series. In 1986 – 1987 *My Little Pony 'n Friends* ran as a syndicated half-hour television programme. The *My Little Pony* segment promoted many of the toys available within this time period, and featured those called Earth, Pegasus and Unicorn ponies among its regular cast, with guest appearances by newer or special

[180] Mark James Russell, *Pop Goes Korea: Behind the Revolution in Movies, Music, and Internet Culture* (California: Stone Bridge Press, 2012).

lines, such as the Flutter and Princess Ponies. The theme song to the programme was the same song that featured in television advertisements for the MLP toys, intrinsically linking the cartoon programme with the physical merchandise. This meant that the toy and television programme had the same intended audience, and Hasbro wanted to encourage girls who had the toys to watch the cartoon, and those who watched the cartoon to buy the toys.

My Little Pony Tales was the final generation 1 television series, and aired on the Disney Channel in 1992. The main seven characters of the series were all female, and when tie-in toys were produced none of the supporting male characters were included in the toy line. Again, this demonstrates that the franchise of MLP was aimed very much at young girls, as the characters Hasbro believed this audience would identify with and enjoy most were characters of the same age and gender.

Generation 2 of MLP was launched in the US in 1997 and the ponies underwent a re-design to make them look more 'horse-like' (Fig 10). The legs and necks were elongated, and the heads could turn, and the body made smaller and thinner.



Figure 10 – A generation 2 pony

This generation was not as popular as generation 1, and was only released in the US for two years and is the only generation of MLP not to spawn any of its own television series. There was a large amount of merchandise released alongside this generation, however, including soft toys, perfumes, clothing and a MLP magazine. Again, these ancillary products were all aimed at the intended audience of MLP, which, regardless of the re-design, remained as young girls. There was a PC game released on CD-Rom for this generation, titled *My Little Pony: Friendship Gardens* (Fig. 11) in 1998. The narrative aim of this game was to take care of a pony, and included activities such as brushing its hair, feeding it and keeping its nursery clean. As the game continued, the player could take their pony to visit other ponies at locations such as a beauty salon and a dance studio, in keeping with the themes of femininity within what is now a diegetic world.

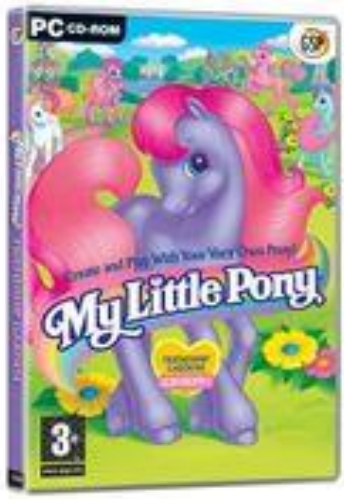


Figure 11 – Generation 2 video game

The main activities of the game focussed on nurturing and caring for the pony, rather than action or puzzle solving activities more prevalent in games aimed at boys or mixed gender audiences. Again, this reinforced MLP as a franchise that engaged with feminine and maternal activities, such as caring and beauty. With the release of generation 3 in 2003 Hasbro returned to a stockier style of pony (Fig. 12). The necks were shortened and heads made proportionally larger so the toys looked less 'horse-like'. Again, the toys had soft manes and tails that could be styled, and moveable heads but static legs.



Figure 12 – A generation 3 Rainbow Dash with moveable head, indicated by the arrow pointing at the neckline

Rather than a television series, generation 3 of MLP included a series of direct-to-DVD films. This was the first series of MLP not to feature any 'villains' or 'enemies', and storylines did not focus on resolving conflicts, instead they acted as 'slice-of-life' episodes. While generation 1 stories were entitled *Escape from Catrina* and *Escape from Midnight Castle,* the titles for generation 3 stories included *Enchanting Birthday* (2003)*, Dancing in the Clouds* (2004) and *Friends*

are Never Far Away (2005). The absence of conflict in this generation further reinforced the brand identity that MLP was for girls, as the storylines focused on socialising and friendship, rather than action. The focus on feminine themes, as well as the continued use of pastel colours and beauty marks, meant that Hasbro were still trying to attract a young female audience.

MLP:FIM is a part of the fourth generation of the MLP franchise, so shares the brand identity and target audience of the previous generations. Importantly, this is the first generation which launched with a television programme, rather than a toy line. As a television programme *MLP:FIM* also had to fit into the brand identity of the channel it would be broadcast on, and simultaneously strengthen the brand identity of both its franchise and its channel. *MLP:FIM* is broadcast on The Hub[181]. It is important to examine how The Hub and its brand identity interplayed with the existing brand and franchise identity of MLP in the development of the *MLP:FIM* television series and subsequently the entire fourth generation of the franchise.

The Hub Network was a joint venture between Hasbro and the Discovery Channel Network and was designed to "target viewers ages 6-12 and strive to offer entertainment for kids rather than the tween fare found on rivals Discovery Channel and Nickelodeon" [182] according to channel developer

[181] The Hub has been known as Discovery Family Channel since October 2014, but as this section deals with the channel's origins and formative years it will refer to the channel by its original name

[182]Rob Owen, "Tuned In: The Hub Network Offers Programs for Younger Children," *Pittsburg Post-Gazette* October 10th 2010.

Margaret Loesch. She said the other networks were focused either on teens or kids in preschool and that there was a niche to exploit.[183] Loesch also stated that "the Hub will be a fun and transformative destination that brings kids and their families together by presenting clever stories and engaging characters,"[184] suggesting that the content would also be designed to appeal to parents or guardians, encouraging them to watch the channel alongside their children. Providing educational and informational content was also a key aim for the channel so, as Head of Discovery David Lazlav explained, The Hub could "provide a compelling platform for building a trusted children's destination."[185] A large amount of the promotional material for the programme, released at its announcement, included references to the channel's aim to provide educational content, such as Discovery's announcement of the channel, which deemed The Hub as "dedicated to High-Quality Children's and Family Entertainment and Educational Content".[186] This was to combat criticism the channel was attracting from advocate groups, who argued the channel was a throwback to the 1980s, where children's television was described as "merely fill-ins between a string of commercials".[187] After The Hub was announced, The Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood sent out a statement calling the

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[183] Joe Flint, "Discovery and Hasbro Name New Kids Channel 'the Hub'," *Los Angeles Times* January 14th 2010.

[184]Anon, "Hasbro and Discovery Communications Announce Joint Television Channel." Discovery Communications, http://corporate.discovery.com/discovery-news/hasbro-and-discovery-communications-announce-joint/.

[185]Michael Schneider. "Hasbro Nabs Discovery Kids Stake: Outlet Relaunching Late 2010 under New Name." *Variety*, 30th April 2009. http://variety.com/2009/scene/news/hasbro-nabs-discovery-kids-stake-1118003029/.

[186]Anon, "Hasbro and Discovery Communications Announce Joint Television Channel."

[187] Evan McLeod Wylie, "'Sesame Street' Opens the Door," *Readers Digest* May 1970. P112

partnership “a new low in children’s television, a network devoted to showing infomercials for Hasbro’s toys and games.”[188] Hasbro proxy-CEO Brian Goldner rebuffed these claims, stating that “a network is not going to be successful if it’s overly commercialized,”[189] and that rather being a channel designed to sell merchandise, “the goal is to create a destination for quality content, and we are confident The Hub can become a strong home for an active and engaged audience."[190] This demonstrates that Hasbro and Discovery wanted to ensure that The Hub was not received as a channel designed purely to distribute television tie-ins to their products and instead wanted to ensure the brand image of the channel and programmes aired were seen as legitimate children’s programming that was educational and that parents could trust. This meant that the programmes featured on the channel at its launch had to be well received by children and parents alike, so The Hub could establish this brand identity.

Alongside *MLP:FIM,* the other launch programmes The Hub developed included *Scrabble Showdown* (2011-2012). In this programme teams comprising of a parent-child duo would compete in a series of spelling and vocabulary tests. This programme is a good example of how The Hub tried to establish its brand image of being parent and child friendly, educational and not overly driven by product placement. In order to maintain this wholesome brand image the programming created that did have toy tie-ins would also have

[188]Schneider, "Hasbro Nabs Discovery Kids Stake: Outlet Relaunching Late 2010 under New Name."
[189] Ibid.
[190] Anon, "Hasbro and Discovery Communications Announce Joint Television Channel."

to convince parents and critics that they were 'quality' educational programming designed to do more than sell toys.

This brings us to the current, 4th generation of the My Little Pony franchise that launched in 2010. By now the franchise had an almost thirty year cultural history as a multimedia franchise, and this new generation had to navigate the already established franchise and brand identity surrounding MLP, while staying relevant and appealing to its young, female intended audience. This is the first time in the franchise's history where the ponies were originally designed for the corresponding television programme and later became toys, rather than starting as a toy line with the television programme following. In practical terms this resulted in the television series, *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic,* acting as the starting point of this franchise's generation, so it influenced how the entirety of Generation 4 would develop. The programme had to balance the previous brand identity of the MLP franchise, which was very feminine and girl-orientated, with the educational and 'quality' brand identity The Hub was trying to establish.

The person chosen to spearhead the new generation was Lauren Faust, who acted as creative director for the first season and was the animator who developed the new look of the ponies for the television series and the generation as a whole. Faust had previous experience working on *The Powerpuff Girls* (Cartoon Network, 1998-2004), alongside her spouse Craig McCraken. Faust was approached to re-boot the MLP franchise as, according to her:

> They [Hasbro] wanted a reboot, and she [Lisa Licht, General Manager of Hasbro Studios] was really pushing to match the right talent with the right project. Hasbro was just coming off the success of Michael Bay's first Transformers movie and Lisa was interested in finding similar "creative stewards" - talent that would re-invent and lend their unique voice to their other properties.[191]

Faust was granted a degree of creative control over the programme and allowed to develop her own ideas on the programme's style and visual aesthetic. This led to it being the first MLP cartoon to be produced in Flash animation, resulting in the programme being brightly coloured and fast-paced. Faust believes that the animation style:

> Was an interesting innovation in that most shows aimed at girls are overly bright, garish, oversaturated and plagued with way too much pink. I think the colorists achieved something that is definitely feminine, but unique in that it is still extremely appealing, pleasant, and devoid of cooties.[192]

By attempting to create an art style that was feminine without being stereotypical, Faust and the creative team gave MLP very different visuals to previous generations (Fig. 13), using vibrant, contrasting colours rather than a complimentary pastel pallet as seen in previous generations.

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[191] Tekaramity. "Equestria Daily: Exclusive Season 1 Retrospective Interview with Lauren Faust." *Equestria Daily*, 2nd September 2011. http://www.equestriadaily.com/2011/09/exclusive-season-1-retrospective.html.

[192] Ibid.



Figure 13 – MLP:FIM cover and Generation 3's Dancing in the Clouds DVD cover

Faust has stated that Hasbro rarely interfered with the production process, and Faust explained that:

> Hasbro's input came mostly when a location had potential to be a playset. Rarity's Carousel Boutique was revised a few times. There were also times when they were working on a toy they wanted to have featured in the show. The hot air balloon was introduced this way.[193]

This meant that, while Faust had to work with characters and settings[194] that had been previously established, she was also allowed a lot of creative freedom. The result was that while *MLP:FIM* needed to conform to the existing brand identity of the franchise and appeal to its young 2 – 11 year old female demographic, it could also innovate and break tradition. Faust, having worked

[193] Ibid.

[194] As Gen 4 main characters Twilight Sparkle, Pinkie Pie, Rainbow Dash, Applejack, Fluttershy and Rarity, along with their home town Ponyville, had all existed in previous generations.

on *The Powerpuff Girls,* was used to story content that was slightly more adult than the previous MLP movies. Indeed, Faust has spoken about the difficultly she had sticking to the needs of the programme's target demographic, stating that:

> [A] challenge was meeting the perceived needs of our young target demographic. We had to figure out how to make the more adventure-y shows compelling and exciting without being scary. It took some extra thought and a combination of careful storytelling, lots of jokes, and appropriate, appealing designs. Tone adjustments helped as well - like lightening a scary situation with humor and whimsical design, or making an otherwise non-threatening scene more tense with art direction, music, and proper timing.[195]

Faust wanted to ensure that parents of the programme's target audience would also enjoy the programme, so designed storylines and included jokes that would allow for 'co-viewing appeal', so parents would watch the programme with their children while ensuring it was still suitable for its young target audience. Linda Steiner, the Senior Vice President and Head of Current Series at Hasbro, said that

> The stories are not just simple stories, and yet the beauty of what the writers did is that the stories can show as simple stories to the

[195] Tekaramity, "Equestria Daily: Exclusive Season 1 Retrospective Interview with Lauren Faust."

> younger audience... there are treats you can pick up for older kids and adults, and the messages, when applied to your life, cross a broad spectrum of personal experiences.[196]

The programme had to follow strict guidelines in order to be classed as 'educational and informational' (E/I), adhere to the 1990 Children's Television Act, and therefore adhere to The Hub's educational brand image. This meant that the programme was quite constrained in the storylines it could portray, as the storylines had to "serve the educational and informational needs of children 16 years of age and under, including the child's intellectual/cognitive or social/emotional needs". [197] Regardless of these constraints, alongside writing episode storylines that parents could relate to alongside the programme's intended audience, the programme utilised "attractive character design and flash animation, clever scripting and off-kilter characterizations"[198] and exuded an air of "neo-sincerity",[199] that made the programme extremely popular with its intended audience of young girls, while also appealing to the parental demographic that was encouraged to watch the programme alongside their children.

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[196] Linda Steiner in "Friendship Is Massive - Ponies, Internet Phenomena and Crossover Audiences." *Daniel Nye Griffiths*, 14th September 2009. http://www.danielnyegriffiths.org/2011/09/friendship-is-money-ponies-internet.html.

[197] Federal Communications Commission, "Children's Educational Television," ed. FCC (2011).

[198] Joe Strike. "Of Ponies and Bronies." *Animation World Network*, 5th Jully 2011. http://www.awn.com/blog/ponies-and-bronies.

[199] Angela Watercutter. "My Little Pony Corrals Unlikely Fanboys Known as 'Bronies'." *Wired*, 9th June 2011. http://www.wired.com/2011/06/bronies-my-little-ponys/.

MLP:FIM therefore adhered to the existing brand identity of the MLP franchise, as it featured a female cast, bright colours, and a focus on friendship and social situations that ensured it would still appeal to its historical target audience of young girls. The E/I elements granted both the programme and the Hub a certain level of legitimacy in which they could rebuff critics who claimed the programme was merely a half-hour commercial for the MLP toy line.

In summary, the My Little Pony franchise had developed over thirty years to become a cultural property aimed at selling pony related toys and media to a young, female audience aimed 2 – 11 years old. Drawing from a cultural history of pony related products being sold to girls, the franchise utilised a feminine visual design, with lots of pinks and pastel colours designed to engender the ponies as feminine, and to use this to appeal to a female market. Hasbro complimented this franchise aim with a family-friendly brand image that would allow parents to feel secure in allowing their daughters to consume My Little Pony products, as they were being marketed as non-violent, non-sexual, age appropriate toys and programmes. Importantly, Generation 4 focussed more explicitly than previous iterations had on trying to encourage parents to co-view the programme alongside their children, including aspects into the television programme that would appeal to adults. These new aspects, such as universal storylines, increased action and humour and a brighter, bolder animation style set the scene for the rise of Bronies, who engaged with these televisual elements and became the programme's accidental audience.

The Development of the Brony Audience

The Brony audience consists of men, aged from their late teens to their forties, who self-identify as fans of *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic (MLP:FIM).* The masculine identity of this audience was an important component of their audience at its inception, as the term 'Bronies' is a portmanteau of 'brother' or 'bro' and 'ponies'. While the term Brony can now also be applied to the individual adult fan, of male or female gender, this chapter will still use the term within its original contexts to refer to adult male fans only[200]. This section will explore how the Brony audience developed and what concepts and actions the audience used to define itself. Brony later became a mainstream term and discourse which garnered media attention, and the way Bronies had initially conducted themselves influenced how Hasbro and Faust (the creator of *MLP:FIM*) responded after Bronies were exposed to the wider public.

The Brony audience originated online on a website called 4chan, a vast image sharing site that launched in 2003. At its inception, 4chan had discussion boards named (and featuring discussions on) hentai, yaoi, cute, random and anime,[201] demonstrating that the website had been designed for users who had an interest in animated content, hence their interest in the article. As 4chan received more traffic, and presumably became more popular, more discussion boards were added, until 4chan was described as "home to

[200] Adult female fan were originally called 'pegasisters' or occasionally 'fillies', but 'Bronies' has developed into an umbrella term for *MLP:FIM*s adult audience.
[201] Jonny Digital, "Complete History of 4chan," Tanasinn Information, http://tanasinn.info/wiki/Complete_History_of_4chan.

numerous boards where anonymous posters discuss everything from anime to sports to paranormal activity to torture porn."[202] In October 2010 an article was posted to 4chan's comics and cartoons board entitled 'The End of the Creator Driven Era in TV Animation'[203] which mentioned the newly aired *MLP: FIM.* The goal of the article, which was originally posted on Cartoon Brew, was to criticise The Hub's launch line-up and castigate Margaret Loesch (the Chief Executive Officer of The Hub) especially, as creating cartoon programming that would merely tick "committee-driven mandates" rather than creating engaging, thoughtful shows. The article argued that this new age of cartoon programming would:

> Increasingly rely on worn but reliable formulas. [Networks] will demand only the surest bets–Looney Tunes revivals, TV series based on feature film characters (*The Penguins of Madagascar* is already on Nick and *Kung Fu Panda: Legends of Awesomeness* is coming soon), shows based on live-action films (*Napoleon Dynamite* is headed to Fox), and the toy-based ideas that comprise the largest portion of the Hub's animation programming.[204]

The article, released a mere week after The Hub had launched, was quickly posted to 4chan's comics and cartoons board.

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[202] Una LaMarche. "Pony up Haters: How 4chan Gave Birth to the Bronies." *Observer Business & Tech*, 9th August 2011. http://observer.com/2011/08/pony-up-haters-how-4chan-gave-birth-to-the-bronies/.

[203] Amid Amidi, "The End of the Creator-Driven Era in Tv Animation," Cartoon Brew, http://www.cartoonbrew.com/ideas-commentary/the-end-of-the-creator-driven-era-29614.html.

[204] Ibid.

Nanashi Tanaka, a 4chan user and Brony, has described the role the article had in bringing *MLP:FIM* to the attention of 4chan users. “It was pretty alarmist, but it also got a lot of us going over to watch the show,” he said. “We were going to make fun of it, but instead everybody got hooked. And then the first pony threads exploded.” [205] Another Brony Alex Davidson shared that experience when he started watching *MLP:FIM*, “I was expecting to hate it. I figured it would be along the same lines as watching *Barney* or something, but it turned out to be something totally different.”[206] The flash animation, quirky characters and humorous storylines were all factors that gained *MLP:FIM* fans on 4chan, with one Brony, Riley Kilo, stating that they were made aware of the programme because “people were attracted to the cuteness of the pony avatars” and recommended the programme to other fans of cartoons and animation.[207] Tanaka continues that “there were Bronies in just about every single group imaginable, from furries to Trekkies to otaku… You can see how word of pony ended up spreading to every corner of the Internet.”[208] News of *MLP:FIM* had spread throughout 4chan and by February 2011 there were 6000

[205] LaMarche, "Pony up Haters: How 4chan Gave Birth to the Bronies."
[206] Sadie Gennis. "Give Bronies a Break! In Defense of Adult My Little Pony Fans." *TV Guide*, 31st July 2013. http://www.tvguide.com/news/bronies-my-little-pony-friendship-magic-1068692/.
[207] LaMarche, "Pony up Haters: How 4chan Gave Birth to the Bronies."
[208] Ibid.

posts about the programme being posted on the discussion boards daily (Fig. 14).[209]



Figure 14 – Graph depicting posts per day in Brony threads on 4Chan

The *MLP:FIM* discussion soon moved to the /b/ board on 4chan, home of random content and notorious as "the Internet's ultimate id for its violent and sexual content."[210] This is where Bronies first started being targeted by online trolls, defined as people who submit deliberately inflammatory articles to an internet discussion, and 4chan users who opposed adult men watching a cartoon aimed at young girls. Kilo states that the proliferation of Bronies, and their vocal support for the programme, was polarising on 4chan. He said that "there were healthy conversations about how cool the show was, or the importance of nostalgia… And then on the other hand there were pictures of

[209] The source for this image is the State of the Herd Report 2014, a report created by a collaboration between the University of Salem and the Brony Community. It collects survey results from over 18,000 participants to collect information about the Brony audience.
[210] LaMarche, "Pony up Haters: How 4chan Gave Birth to the Bronies."

big black dicks and dead horses."[211] Margaret Hartmann also describes the volatile reaction Bronies received on the /b/ boards, writing that:

> Big-eyed, pastel-colored cartoon ponies who talk about friendship are the antithesis of everything /b/ stands for, and thus a civil war broke out on the boards. The denizens of /b/ fought back against the influx of ponydom with bannings and the usual photos of hardcore sex acts and dead things.[212]

This begun the 4chan 'pony wars', where those who disapproved of Bronies would try to shut pony threads down and began "spamming porn and gore in an attempt to dissuade people from posting."[213] 4chan's moderators officially took a stance in February 2011 by starting to "sage [shut down] pony threads and ban users who posted in them."[214] To defend the ban they released the following statement: "Endless pony threads with no actual content other than reaction images. Go start your own pony image board".[215] Tanaka noted that "[the mods] decided that the best solution to the combative atmosphere would be to ban ponies… Ponies' became a banable word, and posting would get you a one-day ban from the site."[216] Although a huge number of bans were issued to Bronies, it did not stop the pony threads. Ponies quickly became the subject

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[211] Ibid.

[212] Margaret Hartmann "The Unlikely Origins of the Brony, or Bros Who Like 'My Little Pony'." *Jezebel*, 4th August 2011. http://jezebel.com/5827591/the-unlikely-origins-of-the-brony-or-dudes-who-like-my-little-pony..

[213] Sgt Scrubnoob. "My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic." *Know Your Meme*, November 2010. http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/subcultures/my-little-pony-friendship-is-magic.

[214] Ibid.

[215] Ibid.

[216] LaMarche, "Pony up Haters: How 4chan Gave Birth to the Bronies."

of “Mods Are Asleep” threads (Fig. 15), and many Bronies were computer-literate men who were able to quickly circumvent the bans imposed on them Tanaka stated that “our saying was ‘Banned from /b/, back in 10 seconds flat.’”[217]



Figure 15 - A post uploaded to 4chan to encourage Bronies to continue to post MLP content

While they received a lot of hostility and hate posts, the Brony audience did not respond to the trolls in kind. As with many internet groups, the Brony audience used catchphrases and memes such as "welcome to the herd" or "confound those ponies" to express their adherence to the audience and develop its culture. And during the ‘pony wars’ one meme in particular exploded in popularity and usage: “love and tolerate” (Fig 16.). Memes are an important part of an internet group as "they come to us framed by specific histories of use and meaning, and are products of specific ideological struggles,"[218] so the use of this particular meme as the Bronies’ main weapon

[217] Ibid.

[218] David Porter, *Internet Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

and response to their 'haters' reveals how this audience was developing and creating its own identity during this time of tension and conflict.



Figure 16 – Meme used during the 'pony wars'

The meme was developed and utilised around the time episode 5 of the series aired, titled 'Griffon the Brush Off', which dealt with themes of forgiveness and tolerance. Brony 'Blasting Gravy' notes that "it is easy to see how the love and tolerance philosophy came up early on. Perhaps the most important of these [episodes] is Griffon the Brush-Off."[219] The meme was used in response to hate posts against *MLP:FIM*, as it would be posted multiple times on threads that criticised the show or Bronies. Another Brony stated that "at that time, it meant that no matter what, we are not afraid and ashamed to show we loved a show everyone thought was just for little girls." [220] The show's lessons about friendship and love became a tool by which Bronies could defend themselves "despite receiving lots of hate from trolls, fans [tried] to avoid being

[219] Robin G, "Memes and Community Building : A Case Study of 'Love and Tolerance' in The "My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic" Community.," in *Ecole Nationale Superieure d'Informatique pour l'Industrie et l'Entreprise* (Ervy, France. July 11th 2011).
[220] Ibid.

confrontational in an attempt to personify the message of kindness put forth by the show."[221]

By adopting the show's messages and their non-aggressive reactions to troll attacks, Bronies quickly established that the virtues of love and tolerance would play a significant part in the audience's identity, which new members also had to adopt in order to combat trolls. While other audiences and communities often have branching identities, as members can like a certain programme for different reasons, the Brony audience had to unite very early on in its development in order to withstand criticism and this unity became an establishing feature for the audience as a whole.

The 'pony wars' quickly died down, and the ban, which was established on February 26th 2011, was completely removed by March 1st 2011[222]. 4chan user Sam Levine noted that "My Little Pony is the only group to take on 4chan and win. 4chan once took on the F.B.I. and won. So you might say that My Little Pony is more powerful than the F.B.I."[223] The *MLP:FIM* online audience had quickly become a powerful online audience, and along with its ever increasing size the audience soon created its own online spaces, where members could communicate and interact away from 4chan. One of the most popular is Equestria Daily (ED, named after the world in which the ponies live), which launched January 18th 2011, but gained a huge increase in traffic in March

[221] Sgt Scrubnoob, "My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic," Know Your Meme, http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/subcultures/my-little-pony-friendship-is-magic.
[222] Scrubnoob, "My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic."
[223]Hartmann, "The Unlikely Origins of the Brony, or Bros Who Like 'My Little Pony'."

2011 when, as explained by Levine, Bronies as an audience group became “extremely bored with putting up with other people’s shit”[224] and moved away from 4chan. Seeking a place to interact, the audience moved to ED. The site is run by Shaun Scotellaro, who said his reason for starting the website was less to do with the animosity on the 4chan boards but because he was worried "that Hasbro would cut the show off at the end of Season 1,"[225] and that *MLP:FIM* would need a united fan base "to keep the pony train going, so to speak."[226] By June 2011, just six months after its launch, Equestria Daily had gained 14.8 million page views, and receiving three new hits per second.

After moving off the 4chan threads and onto their own, dedicated, online spaces, Bronies also spread out onto other content sharing websites. They garnered attention through content posted on YouTube, DeviantArt (which had over 1.3 million pieces of MLP artwork by August 2014[227]) and other content sharing websites. Fan videos posted on YouTube were one of the first ways Bronies became known to the wider internet audience. Clips appeared in YTPMV (YouTube poop music videos), where clips from various films and television series would be edited together to fit the beat of a song. These YTPMV often contained clips from different shows in each video, so knowledge of *MLP:FIM* was spread to fans of other shows featured within the same videos. Mash-ups of the characters with blockbusters and action movies, such as *300*

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[224] LaMarche, "Pony up Haters: How 4chan Gave Birth to the Bronies."
[225] Strike, "Of Ponies and Bronies.
[226]Strike, "Of Ponies and Bronies."
[227] Watercutter, "My Little Pony Corrals Unlikely Fanboys Known as ‘Bronies’."

Ponies, The Rainbow Knight and *Inglorious Ponies*, where audio from different popular films was dubbed over footage from the show, also became popular on video sharing sites such as YouTube and Vimeo.[228] Henri Yount created a *MLP:FIM/Watchmen* mashup that, when posted to YouTube, gained over a third of a million views in a matter of weeks.[229] Some Bronies even created long running series using footage from the programme that have become popular within the audience, such as the PONY.MOV series, and the Friendship is Witchcraft series. These mash-ups and crossovers with other media helped spread knowledge of the programme to the wider internet audience, as Angela Watercutter argues, "the fan videos might be the main reason anyone outside the Brony audience knows the show as a meme."[230]

Bronies themselves also helped increase size of the audience, with over 75% of more than 21,000 Bronies who completed an online survey stating that they had introduced their friends to the programme, and nearly a quarter had also introduced their parents to the programme[231] (Fig. 17). A full two thirds of the audience were influenced to watch the programme for the first time because

[228] Scrubnoob, "My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic."
[229] Watercutter, "My Little Pony Corrals Unlikely Fanboys Known as 'Bronies'."
[230] Ibid.
[231] Julie Cook and Rebecca Haines, "2014 state of the Herd Report," in *Brony Herd Census* (Salem: Salem State University, 2014).

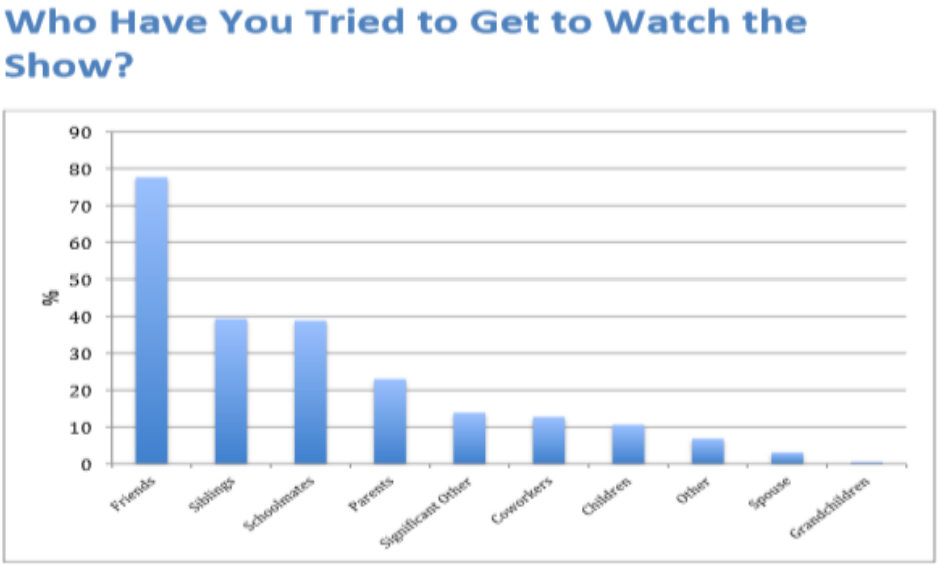


Figure 17 – A graph from the 2014 State of the Herd Report depicting who Bronies had introduced the programme to

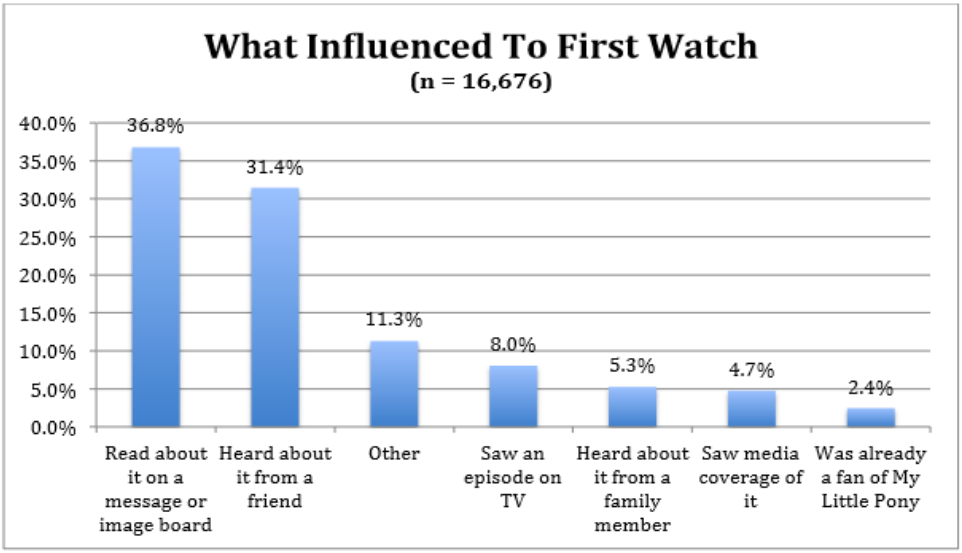


Figure 18 – Graph from State of the Herd Report depicting how Bronies were introduced to MLP:FIM

they either read about it on an internet message board or were exposed through a friend who already watched the series (Fig 18). This links back to the previous chapter, which explored Alasuutari and Tulloch's ideas of 'audiencing'

rather than audiences.[232] The Brony audience was involved in actively growing the size of their own audience. They also named themselves, demonstrating that this audience are incredibly self-aware and also created their own online spaces in which to operate, and they engage with *MLP:FIM* in a multitude of ways. The Brony audience created their own traditions and practices around the programme, but separately from Hasbro and the carefully constructed brand identity of the programme.

As knowledge of the Brony audience spread and interest in the audience increased, online news outlets became interested in why *MLP:FIM* attracted an adult, male audience. While many Bronies have said they were initially attracted by the art style of the programme, the reasons given for why they have continued watching the programme point towards a range of different factors. Sean Sporman states that, while many Bronies give different reasons as to why they love the series, the most repeated included references to "fleshed-out, relatable characters; a lack of cynicism and an optimistic setting, bright and colorful animation, enjoyable songs, quality voice acting, and Looney Tunes-style slapstick."[233]

Alongside the widely identifiable storylines and occasional adult humour Faust used to develop the programme's co-viewing appeal, Bronies were also attracted to the series' message of love, tolerance, and friendship. Brony

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[232] Tulloch, *Watching Television Audiences: Cultural Theories and Methods*, 31.
Alasuutari, *Rethinking the Media Audience the New Agenda*, 6.
[233] Sean Sporman. "2012: Year of the Pony." *WTVY.com*, 9th July 2013. http://www.wtvy.com/home/headlines/2012-Year-of-the-Pony-184645861.html..

Davidson stated that “probably the most special thing about it, though, is that it's just so positive and colourful and nice that I can't help but feel happy after watching it.” [234] Contemporary television programming aimed at the young male audience had become increasingly violent and thematically dark, with shows such as *Dexter* and *Breaking Bad* featuring morally ambiguous, criminal characters. In contrast to this trend, Bronies were attracted to the sincerity by which the characters enjoy friendships and strive to be good people. Indeed, the results of the census place an affinity for the characters as the main reason Bronies continue to watch the programme. [235] Equestria Daily also demonstrated this, as during an interview with Faust they wanted to know: “how did the team's ambitions drive the construction of the main cast and their excellent compositions: fantastical yet relatable, strong yet flawed, caring yet selfish, appealing yet imperfect?” [236] Fan’s attention and interest in the characters of *MLP:FIM* demonstrates that the realistic and engaging characters were a strong reason that Bronies became so attached to the programme.

The ability of men to identify with female characters has also drawn a lot of media attention. Sadie Gennis argued in an online article that:

> Each episode of *MLP* follows The Mane Six, a group of young ponies based on traditional female archetypes. But *MLP* subverts these clichés and demonstrates that these characters aren't just girly

[234]Gennis, "Give Bronies a Break! In Defense of Adult My Little Pony Fans."
[235]Cook and Haines, "2014 state of the Herd Report," 79.,
[236]Tekaramity, "Equestria Daily: Exclusive Season 1 Retrospective Interview with Lauren Faust."

> ponies, but fully developed personalities with a genuine level of depth and believability. They have normal jobs and hobbies and use their unique talents to defeat evil and overcome obstacles.[237]

This demonstrates that Faust's aim to create a 'girly' show that would appeal to young girls but not patronise, stereotype or condescend them had been successful. Faust had "wanted [to produce] a respectable show for girls…Saying something is 'for girls' or 'girly' is usually equated with being not worthwhile, being stupid."[238] She created a programme where the female characters were distinct, had their own dreams, goals and personalities, and discovered that men were able to identify with them just as easily as girls did. Academic Sam Crook argued that Fluttershy was one of the few positively portrayed introverted characters on television and that he identified with her character strongly because, previously, television did not feature storylines revolving around introverts (unless the motive was to show the character how much better life was once they started acting like an extrovert). For an audience that consists of a large number of teenagers and young men who feel most comfortable while on the internet, the inclusion of an introverted character would give them a point of reference by which they could start identifying with the ponies. This is further emphasised by Brony Allen, who said that "this weird alchemy that Lauren Faust tapped into when she set out to make the show

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[237]Gennis, "Give Bronies a Break! In Defense of Adult My Little Pony Fans."

[238]Faine Greenwood. "Bronies: My Little Pony Reboot Finds a Passionate Grown-up Audience." *Global Post*, 1st October 2012. http://www.globalpost.com/dispatches/globalpost-blogs/weird-wide-web/bronies-my-little-pony-reboot-finds-passionate-grown-audi.

accessible to kids and their parents hooks into the male geek's reptilian hindbrain and removes a lifetime's behavioural indoctrination against pink."[239] Many of the stylistic aspects Faust and her creative team developed to encourage the parents of *MLP:FIM's* young, target demographic, ended up making the programme appeal to its accidental Brony audience as well. The universal storylines, relatable and varied characters kept the Bronies coming back after the quirky, flash animation originally attracted them to programme.

Discovery by Hasbro

How Hasbro and the *MLP:FIM* creative team first encountered the Brony audience would play a significant role in how they perceived their accidental Brony audience. Hasbro had to decide whether they would regard Bronies as a possible new source of financial revenue, and a positive addition to their target demographic, or whether they were too different from the established young, female audience and would damage the MLP and Hasbro brand. This section will follow how Faust and Hasbro decided to transform their accidental audience into an absorbed audience. It will examine how Hasbro sought to re-frame the Brony audience in the media, and how they have added to the advertising, content and merchandising of *MLP:FIM* in order to cultivate and monetise their Brony audience. Accidental audiences are, by their nature, unexpected, so Hasbro did not have a plan on how to manage their Brony

[239]Watercutter, "My Little Pony Corrals Unlikely Fanboys Known as 'Bronies'."

audience. Instead their actions were a response to how the media had initially portrayed Bronies, acting as 'damage control' to repair the public's perception of the Brony audience.

Hasbro, Faust and the creative team behind *MLP:FIM* first encountered their accidental Brony audience through the audience's online practices. Faust was the first member of the team to discover Bronies. When asked how she encountered them she said:

> Oh gee - I feel old to admit I did not know about 4chan until I was checking comments on an episode that had been put on YouTube. Someone pointed out that people were freaking out about the show on 4chan, so I moseyed on over and WOW - was I surprised! I checked in regularly (strategically ignoring unsavoury material as best I could) and pointed it out to some other members of the crew.[240]

Faust and the creative team became aware of their accidental audience early on in the first season's run, but they did not witness the 4chan pony war in action. Instead Faust encountered the audience at a time where their efforts and energy were focussed on creating their own fan-created content and discussing the merits of the show, rather than when they were being bombarded with explicit hate messages and images. This meant that Faust and Hasbro were introduced to the creative and community driven aspects of the

[240] Tekaramity, "Equestria Daily: Exclusive Season 1 Retrospective Interview with Lauren Faust."

audience first, so their initial impression of Bronies was positive. Faust kept returning to the message boards to track the discussions that Bronies were having, meaning that she was observing those members of the audience who were invested in the storylines and characters and wanted to share their enthusiasm with their online audience.

The fact that Hasbro and Faust's initial communication with the Brony audience was positive meant that they were more willing to publically act on behalf of their accidental Brony audience. Bronies acted not only as an audience, but as an audience that became culturally and discursively visible around the MLP brand, and Hasbro and Faust had to ensure that the discourse surrounding Bronies was not damaging. Jonathan Gray argues that:

> If media multinationals and individual audience members or communities have varying interpretive, framing strategies that are built in their paratexts, media multinationals have a significant advantage in both blanketing the media environment with their own images, and making that environment inhospitable for others' image.[241]

Applying Gray's notions here, we can say that, had Bronies been presenting a contrasting image of the programme to Hasbro, Hasbro would have had the ability to discourage and shut the audience down before it potentially damaged the brand of MLP. However, because Faust had viewed the positive aspects of

[241]Jonathan Gray, *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 164.

the Brony audience, she did not think of their existence as a threat to the cultural perception of My Little Pony. She and Hasbro worked to ensure that the public perception of Bronies was also positive, as reinforced by Loesch commenting that "we decided to salute and embrace all the viewers who have embraced our brand."[242]

It was the 'unsavoury material' that was contained within certain aspects of the audience that caused Faust and Hasbro the most concern, as this was the material that, if it became associated with the programme, could damage the wholesome, family friendly brand. While there is a long history of pornographic and sexually explicit material being created by viewers of children's animation, such as Disney Princesses,[243] these are established brands. *MLP:FIM* was still trying to establish its own brand identity, so the explicit art would have damaged the new, unestablished, brand of the programme. While only 20% of Bronies consider themselves to be 'furries',[244] that is having "an [often sexual] interest in anthropomorphic animals or creatures,"[245] a significant amount of content produced on the 4chan message boards was sexually explicit drawings of the characters, sometimes anthropomorphised and sometimes not. This type of sexual content was quickly dubbed 'clop-clop' (a play on fap-fap, an

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[242] Judann Pollack. "'My Little Pony: The Friendship Is Magic' Gains Unexpected Audience -- Adults." Advertising Age, http://adage.com/article/special-report-americas-hottest-brands/america-s-hottest-brands-pony-friendship-magic/231166/..

[243] Anon, Disney Princesses Turn Porn Stars: From One Questionable Role Model to Another." The Huffington Post UK, http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2014/02/04/disney-princesses-porn-stars-_n_4722181.html..

[244]Cook and Haines, "2014 state of the Herd Report," 50.

[245]Rob Staeger, "Invasion of the Furries." *Furry Fandom Infocentre*, 26th July 2011. http://www.furryfandom.info/furries.htm."

onomatopoeic representation of masturbation), and gained a lot of attention from the media who condemned the extreme sexualisation of female cartoon characters.

While sites such as Equestira Daily do not contain clop-clop, or any sexually explicit content, message boards on 4chan still act as hubs where this content is uploaded and shared. As media news outlets started to take an interest in the Brony phenomenon, with the first articles appearing in 2011, this sexually explicit content was often referenced in order to portray Bronies in a negative light. US radio personality Howard Stern spent an entire broadcast trying to determine if all Bronies were "sexually deviant cloppers" (someone who masturbates over images of the characters).[246] An article posted on the website Return of Kings also argued that "if you are watching a TV show geared towards children, you have problems. Further, for a grown man to eagerly consume a TV show aimed at girls is to admit the complete devolution of men into female children."[247] Bronies have also been described as "a bunch of harmless fem-boys who stopped maturing at age seven" and "perma-virgins" who should find something better to do with their lives and "act like a man".[248]

[246]Lofotenburg. ""I Wonder If This Guy's a Clopper": Howard Stern Labels Bronies." *Lofotenburg*. 6th October 2012. https://lofotenburg.wordpress.com/2012/10/06/i-wonder-if-this-guys-a-clopper-howard-stern-labels-bronies/.

[247] Charles Wickelus, "Bronies: The Men Who Love "My Little Pony" Are Losers." *Return of Kings*, 2nd February 2014. http://www.returnofkings.com/28416/bronies-the-men-who-love-my-little-pony-are-losers#!

[248] Kurt Schlichter, "Terrifying New Trend: Grown Men Who Dig 'My Little Pony?'." *Breit Bart*, 25th April 2012. http://www.breitbart.com/big-hollywood/2012/04/25/my-little-pony/.

This was the first impression the Brony audience was making on the mainstream offline audience and it was at this moment that Faust and Hasbro knew they had to respond to the claims being made about Bronies in order to perform damage control. By officially commenting on the Bronies they would legitimise the audience, bringing it further to the attention of the mainstream media and transcend it above being a niche internet group. So, while the negative critical attention of the media had made the term Brony known outside of internet circles, Hasbro and Faust knew that their express involvement would bring the audience more attention. They were aware that if they presented Bronies correctly, they could reframe them into a brand friendly addition to the MLP audience, and that the wider critical attention Bronies would receive after being legitimised by Hasbro would contain the positive messages that Hasbro wanted it to.

Much of the media attention had focussed on the sexual aspects of the audience. Therefore, in order to draw critical attention away from the sexually explicit side of the Brony audience, Faust acted as the public figurehead of Hasbro and began to draw attention to the other parts of the audience and re-frame the Brony audience in the eyes of the wider public. Faust publicly communicated and encouraged members of the audience who did not threaten the brand of MLP or Hasbro, and positively engaged with the 'appropriate' content that they created. Linda Steiner stated in an interview that:

> The fans have been amazing at keeping her [Faust] in the loop. Almost daily, we are all sending each other the latest from the Internet - between the writers, producers and directors on the show. I can't tell you how much we thank the fans for all of their brilliance. It's made our job incredibly fun and rewarding.[249]

This served to legitimatise certain, acceptable, factions of the Brony audience. Those who created content that Faust and the team would publicly praise were being elevated above the less savoury aspects, which were being ignored by the programme's creative team. Whenever asked about the audience, Faust and the team would only mention non-sexual fan creations, in order to draw attention away from potentially brand damaging content. This created what Suzanne Scott would call a "digital enclosure,"[250] where the television industry creates a "sanitized, market-friendly version"[251] of an audience to present to the general public.

Faust would also criticise opponents of the Brony audience, stating that "people are so uncomfortable with Bronies because they think no self-respecting man would *lower* himself to be interested in girl things unless he's perverted… Being girly is the ultimate insult, and it's unfair to both men and

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[249]Griffiths, "Friendship Is Massive - Ponies, Internet Phenomena and Crossover Audiences | D Nye Everything."
[250] Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture*, 150.
[251] Ibid.

girls."[252] These comments served to highlight the ridiculousness of some of the comments the Brony audience had attracted from mainstream media outlets. Instead of 'perma-virgins' or 'cowards', Faust wanted to frame Bronies as brave individuals fighting against culturally enforced binary gender roles. However, it did not stop there. Faust especially, began to proactively engage with the Brony audience outside of interviews in an attempt to portray them in a positive light. For example, she messaged Bronies on DeviantArt and auctioned off her own production sketches of the ponies to the Brony audience in order to raise money for charity (raising $15,000 in the process).[253] Voice actress Tara Strong would regularly tweet about Brony activities,[254] and supervising director Jayson Thiessen attended a Q & A session on Ponychan. One of the most explicit ways Hasbro tried to challenge the negative Brony stereotypes, and re-frame the Brony audience in a positive, brand strengthening way, was the development of the *Bronies: The Extremely Unexpected Adult Fans of My Little Pony* (2012) documentary.

The idea of a Brony documentary was conceived by *MLP:FIM* guest star John de Lancie, who voiced villain Discord in the season two premiere. At this point the Brony audience was known to the creative team, so de Lancie's

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[252] Melody Wilson, "Brony Love: Lauren Faust, Creator of My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic, Live from Bronycon!." *Bitch Media*, 3rd July 2012. https://bitchmedia.org/post/lauren-faust-creator-of-my-little-pony-friendship-is-magic-live-from-bronycon-feminist-magazine-bronies-gender-fandom.

[253]Daniel Nye Griffiths, "Colt Success: My Little Pony's Reboot, Friendship Is Magic." *Wired UK*, 14th September 2009. http://www.wired.co.uk/magazine/archive/2011/09/play/colt-success.

[254] Lauren Rae Orsini, "Tara Strong Spearheads Brony Campaign against Jerry Springer." *The Daily Dot*, August 1st 2012. http://www.dailydot.com/news/tara-strong-brony-campaign-jerry-springer/.

involvement in an episode was a definite 'nod' to Bronies, as De Lancie stated in an interview that Faust said "We hired you because you played Q"[255], a character who would be familiar to Bronies from his involvement in *Star Trek*[256]. De Lancie states that he did the voiceover work, and thought nothing of it until he started receiving a large amount of fan mail, and as he said, "these aren't little girls that are writing [to] me."[257] He was then approached by Bronies while at a fan convention and decided to look further into the subculture. De Lancie saw parallels between Bronies and other sub-cultures that, due to his history as a sci-fi star, he had been involved with and found that "what they ended up doing is to create an audience that they could be with each other without being ridiculed by other people…. And then the next thing is I saw them being… ridiculed."[258]

De Lancie spoke about his discovery with producer Michael Brockhoff, who stated that:

> I was very interested, because this is fascinating — who are these people? I went home and did some research, and ended up calling him up and going, 'Hey, what if we did a documentary on the

[255] Karl Keily, "John De Lancie Talks 'Star Trek,' 'My Little Pony' and Brony Phenomenon." *Spin Off Online*, 7th April 2014. http://spinoff.comicbookresources.com/2014/04/07/eccc-john-de-lancie-talks-star-trek-my-little-pony-and-brony-phenomenon/.

[256] Jeff McGinnis, "John De Lancie Discusses Brony Documentary." *The Toledo Free Press*, 12th July 2014. http://www.toledofreepress.com/tag/john-de-lancie/.

[257] Ibid.

[258] Ibid.

> Brony? It could be really fascinating to introduce to the world who the Bronies are.'[259]

It was not just Faust and Steirner who were working to defend the Brony audience. De Lancie's profile as a well-established and respected star added another layer of legitimacy to the audience. While he was involved in the production of *MLP:FIM*, he was not presenting himself as a member of the creative team or Hasbro. Instead he emphasised his history with *Star Trek* fans and sub-cultures, and stated that his motivation for creating the documentary was to stop the public persecution of Bronies. The documentary itself was also funded through a Kick-Starter campaign and paid for by fans rather than Hasbro[260]. This would ensure that it would not be perceived as a marketing campaign from Hasbro, and instead emphasised the involvement of the Bronies. This contributed to De Lancie appearing as an impartial individual, who would be seen as not having an ulterior motive for defending the Brony audience. De Lancie reinforced this by stating in an interview that:

> In the best way, I'm presenting a mirror, nothing more, and the Bronies' responses have been great. Just great. Which isn't to say I'm a fan of the show - I'm not really a fan of any show – but I am a

[259] Ibid.

[260] The campaign only asked for $60,000 but fans ended up donating $322,022 to get the documentary made.

> fan of the people willing to stand up to the jeers society may throw their way. So I wanted to be a support to them.[261]

This deliberately positioned him on the side of the Bronies, and also positioned him away from Hasbro. By saying that he was not a fan of the show it suggests that de Lancie was not creating the documentary in order to get *MLP:FIM* more viewers. This meant that people would believe his main aim was to stop Bronies being ridiculed, and not that he wanted to protect the brand image of the programme and franchise.

Nonetheless, just because de Lancie was not directly associated with Hasbro did not mean he produced this documentary without input from them. He states in an interview he gave during production that "Lauren Faust, who created *My Little Pony*, is repeatedly checking in with us, weekly, if not almost daily." [262] While at its inception the documentary was marketed as being separate from Hasbro and framed as being made 'by Bronies, for Bronies', Hasbro was still involved with its production. They wanted to ensure that Bronies would be portrayed in a way that would not threaten the integrity of the Hasbro or the MLP brand.

This led to the documentary that would be shot at BronyCon, a fan convention in Seacaucus, N.J., and focus on Bronies who attended that event, ostensibly to "answer essential questions about the Bronies: who they were, where they

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[261]Alasdair Stuart, "Star Trek's John De Lancie Interviewed." Games Radar +, 2nd October 2012. http://www.gamesradar.com/john-de-lancie-interview/.
[262]Ibid.

came from, and what they aimed to do."[263] The film wanted to challenge the perception that Bronies were 'losers' who lived in their parents' basement, and instead show them as real people who came from a range of backgrounds but all still managed to enjoy the programme.

Critical response to the documentary from non-Bronies was mostly positive, with one reviewer stating that "this documentary definitely delivers a more positive take on the whole 'Brony' phenomenon".[264] Another wrote that:

> I'm still not a fan, but to me, this documentary isn't about the show or the fans, it's about our ability to accept people who have different views or interests to us. It really made me question my assumptions about Bronies, but also my assumptions about myself and my identity as a liberal, accepting person.[265]

Non-Bronies praised it for challenging their expectations about Bronies and showing the audience in a positive light. Unfortunately, Brony reactions to the film were more negative, with many Bronies labelling the documentary as 'homophobic'. One Brony wrote a review stating that:

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[263] Anon, "Bronydoc Film Official Site | "Bronies: The Extremely Unexpected Adult Fans of My Little Pony"," Brony Doc, http://www.bronydoc.com/.

[264] Lambda462 in "Bronies: The Extremely Unexpected Adult Fans of My Little Pony on Gog.Com." gog.com, https://www.gog.com/movie/bronies_the_extremely_unexpected_adult_fans_of_my_little_pony..

[265] Jeremy Hammond, "Bronies: The Extremely Unexpected Adult Fans of My Little Pony Reviews & Ratings - Imdb." *Internet Movie Database,* 20th January 2014. http://www.imdb.com/title/tt2446192/reviews..

> Several of the central characters focus on the fact that people might think they're gay because they enjoy a little girl's cartoon. Each of them make certain to illustrate that being gay is a bad thing as they proclaim proudly that they are not. Very disappointed in this film that you'd think would share a message that everyone should be accepted for who they are, but the message is quite different if you're open about being gay.[266]

Another common criticism was that the documentary did not demonstrate that the audience is varied and dynamic, encompassing different kinds of people. Brony OblakavLese wrote that his "main problem is with the protagonists, watching them made me cringe a bit. They don't represent an average Brony"; while Marcusaurelis76 wrote "Nothing in this represents me, my friends, or anyone else in the audience."[267] The Bronies that the documentary focussed on were white, heteronormative young men in their 20s, and while they were framed and portrayed as friendly and engaging, the Brony audience was overall disappointed with the lack of diversity among the main interviewees. The sexual aspects of the audience were also not mentioned or explored in the documentary, so ultimately it portrayed a superficial insight into the 'acceptable' aspects of the audience, rather than presenting a deep exploration

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[266]John McGonnigal, "Very Homophobic Movie!" Amazon Customer Reviews: Bronies: The Extremely Unexpected Adult Fans of My Little Pony", *The Internet Movie Database.* 28th July 2014 http://www.amazon.com/Bronies-Extremely-Unexpected-Complete-Edition/product-reviews/0988849631/ref=cm_cr_dp_qt_hist_one/179-9788421-7871313?ie=UTF8&filterBy=addOneStar&showViewpoints=0

[267] OblakavLese and Marcusaurelis76 in "Bronies: The Extremely Unexpected Adult Fans of My Little Pony on Gog.Com."

of the audience itself. *Bronies: The Extremely Unexpected Adult Audience of MLP:FIM* managed to portray Bronies in a sympathetic, positive light to a non-Brony audience, but failed to deliver the critical, deep insight it had promised its Brony viewers. It had succeeded in Hasbro's aim to improve how the wider public responded to Bronies, and "introduce to world to who Bronies are",[268] rather than succeed to appeal to the Brony audience itself. This is an example of Hasbro once again placing public perception of Bronies above the Brony audience itself, as the documentary was ultimately more concerned with re-framing Bronies to the wider public, rather than entertaining Bronies themselves.

Absorbing the Brony Audience

The reason that Hasbro wanted to absorb Bronies and portray them in a positive, affirming way was so that they could transform this accidental audience into an absorbed audience, and then cultivate them without damaging their pre-existing brand identity. Hasbro recognised that the Brony audience could be financially valuable, and wanted to monetise this audience without sacrificing their young, female audience. Once public perception of Bronies was no longer a danger to the franchise's brand identity, Hasbro decided they could actively absorb this audience and encourage Bronies to engage with and watch *MLP:FIM.* Hasbro saw the financial potential in viewing

[268] Ibid.

Bronies as another aspect of their intended audience. This led to Hasbro utilising three official strategies to continuing the absorption of the Brony audience, which had begun with Faust defending and engaging with Bronies online. Hasbro produced merchandise of *MLP:FIM* that would appeal to the Brony audience, created advertising that would appeal to the Brony audience, and adapting the content of the programme in ways that would appeal to the Brony audience.

The Brony audience has been, since its inception, interested in content surrounding *MLP:FIM*, and its fan-created online content had been instrumental in introducing the programme to a wider audience. As the audience was so involved in creating paratexts and ancillary products around the text online, this soon moved offline and Bronies began "creating their own memorabilia and tributes to the series"[269] offline. Derek Johnson writes about 'enfranchising the audience', which refers to:

> A more ambivalent recognition of the contradictory positions offered to and taken up by consumers within the institutions of media franchising. By creating consumer-franchisee subjectivities based in overlapping identities of work and play, this enfranchisement has adapted the industrial multiplication and

[269] Gennis, "Give Bronies a Break! In Defense of Adult My Little Pony Fans."

> reproduction of culture to the relations and exchanges of emerging social media.[270]

In this example Bronies were creating their own products that tied into the MLP brand. This demonstrated to Hasbro that there was an opportunity to monetise the Brony audience through selling them official MLP merchandise. If Bronies were creating their own products for the franchise, they would also consume official products of the franchise. Gregory Schmidt notes that Hasbro considers MLP a brand able to "traverse generations of fans and proving significant and valuable to individuals whether they are male or female, 10 or 30."[271] Hasbro began designing and creating merchandise specifically for their Brony audience in 2011. Crystal Flynn, a rep for Hasbro, stated that while Hasbro will always market the brand to young girls, "we've found ways to strike the right balance



Figure 19 – A Brony t-shirt for sale at the 2011 Comic-Con

[270] Johnson, *Media Franchising: Creative License and Collaboration in the Culture Industries*, 199.

[271] Lincoln Geraghty, *Cult Collectors: Nostalgia, Fandom and Collecting Popular Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), 183.

by working with our licensees to offer our adult fans exciting merchandise geared just for them."[272]

The first officially licensed merchandise orientated specifically towards the Brony audience was launched at the Hasbro booth at a 2011 Comic-Con. It was a t-shirt manufactured in adult sizes, with a graphic of a pony, and the word Brony, blazoned across it (Fig 19.), and was originally available exclusively at conventions. The colour scheme was dramatically different to that of the programme itself, comprising of mostly grey fabric, and showing that this product was intentionally designed to appeal to a demographic that differed from their young, female audience. Since the release of this first shirt, Hasbro has created and released more clothing merchandise for Bronies, ranging from simply selling t-shirts designed for the young female audience in adult sizes, to entirely new shirts aimed at and specifically sold to Bronies that are only available in adult sizes. This demonstrates that Hasbro did not want to alienate their two main audiences from each other, as some merchandise was available to both, but that Hasbro had also recognise that their audiences were contrasting. Aware that Bronies and young girls may be watching the programme for different reasons, Hasbro recognised that they may want different styles of merchandise.

Not all merchandise produced was so drastically different to that which pre-existed the discovery and absorption of the Brony audience. At the same

[272]Gennis, "Give Bronies a Break! In Defense of Adult My Little Pony Fans."

convention, where voice actress from the show Tara Strong attended a panel and spoke in her character's voice, a new line of toy figurines[273] was released exclusively for the Brony audience that attended the conventions.[274] While this toy line was equally suitable for the franchise's young female audience, the decision to release the line at conventions, where the Brony audience comprised the large majority of present fans, demonstrated that Hasbro were still specifically targeting Bronies with this toy line, rather than their young audience. Jonathan Gray argued that "toys not only intensified several themes [of the show]…but also allowed communities to personalize these themes, situating [the audience] in the middle and as active participant."[275] While he was not discussing MLP, this still applies. By targeting the Brony audience with a toy line, Hasbro were inviting them to expand of the themes of *MLP:FIM* television programme and become 'active participants' and 'enfranchised'[276] with Hasbro endorsed products. This further demonstrated that Hasbro were trying to merge their intended audience, who were already 'active participants' in the franchise, with the Brony audience.

Another aspect of the MLP franchise that proved wildly popular with the Brony audience was the *MLP:FIM* comic book series. Released in 2012 and set after the events of season 2, the comic sold over one hundred thousand copies.[277]

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[273]Charles Kenny, "This Post Contains a Serious and Important Discussion About Bronies." *The Animation Anomaly*, 23rd November 2011. http://animationanomaly.com/2011/11/23/this-post-contains-a-serious-and-important-discussion-about-bronies/#.VBxt2BaTL20..

[274]Geraghty, *Cult Collectors: Nostalgia, Fandom and Collecting Popular Culture*, 182.

[275]Gray, *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts*, 183.

[276]Johnson, *Media Franchising: Creative License and Collaboration in the Culture Industries*, 199.

[277] Sporman, "2012: Year of the Pony."

The comic out sold popular superhero titles and required a second printing as Hasbro had not realised how popular it would be amongst the show's adult male fans. While My Little Pony had always been a franchise, and earlier generations had released tie-in magazines that contained short stories involving the characters, Gen 4 was the first to contain a dedicated comic with a developing storyline that exists with the television series' universe. It is, therefore, an example of transmedia 'world-building' targeted at the Brony audience. Jenkins argues that "serialized entertainment…demand[ed] a committed and engaged reader, one who would track down each new instalment and make links between chunks of information dispersed across the unfolding narrative."[278] While Bronies were not the only viewers of *MLP:FIM* who would be committed and engaged readers, Jenkins goes on to say that "this is especially the case in an era when people can pool knowledge and compare notes online".[279] Hasbro knew that Bronies, who primarily operated online, would be the audience who would appreciate serialised and transmedia products that not only contained the characters, but also tried to actively world-build and develop complexity into existing storylines.

Alongside producing merchandise for the Brony audience, Hasbro also changed their marketing techniques to absorb, and hopefully increase, the Brony audience. Before the launch of season 2 in September 2011, Hasbro released a

[278] Jenkins, Ford, and Green, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture*, 134.
[279] Ibid.

series of parody billboard ads to advertise the series to a more adult, pop-culture aware audience (Fig. 20). [280]



Figure 20 – Billboards promoting season 2 of MLP:FIM

These billboards parodied popular films such as *Bridesmaids* (2011) and *Poltergeist* (1982). These films would not be familiar to the 2-11 year old female demographic, so were a decisive choice to instead appeal to adults and the Brony audience, who may be familiar with the material being parodied. However, the advertisements contained no material that would be unsuitable for the programme's original demographic to see, so while young girls would not understand the billboards, they would also not be shocked or scared by them. Hasbro's decision to actively advertise *MLP:FIM* to adults who would understand the billboard parodies meant that the accidental Brony audience was developing into an intended audience. Hasbro were attempting to

[280] Kenny, "This Post Contains a Serious and Important Discussion About Bronies."

incorporate Bronies into a two-tier intended audience alongside the young female audience of the programme.

An extended promo of the programme's second season, which was released in 2011 on the Hub, contained an explicit reference to the Brony audience. The promo itself is a parody of Katy Perry's song 'California Gurls', renamed 'Equestria Girls', where the main cast sing about the programme to the tune of Perry's original single. While this is a parody like the billboards, the content is more likely to be familiar to a young female audience. Instead, the important aspect of the promo is that it contains the line, "Bronies hang out too. Because they know we're awesome fillies," and is sung 30 seconds into the one and a half minute promo. This advert was designed for and shown on the Hub Network, demonstrating that by the end of season 1 and the start of season 2, Hasbro was blatantly courting the Brony audience, and was willing to advertise on the channel that Bronies were an important and valued part of their audience. By releasing an advertisement that would appeal to both Bronies and young girls, Hasbro was consolidating its two main audiences, meaning that Bronies had officially become a part of Hasbro's intended, targeted audience.

Arguably the most important way Hasbro absorbed the Brony audience, and proved that they saw Bronies as part of their intended audience, was through their practice of assimilating aspects of Brony culture into the television programme *MLP:FIM* itself. As Jonathan Gray argues, fan created content, while lacking the circulatory systems of the industry, "can and often do become

important additions to a text."[281] Hasbro developed this and allowed Brony content to "[move] from 'secondary' to 'primary'…[and work] with the show as a bona fide part of the text."[282] This was the most explicit method that Hasbro could use to demonstrate their support and acceptance to the Brony audience, and that was to acknowledge them within the televisual text itself. As Casey Shreve notes:

> As the show progresses, themes of fan creation are written into it almost in a real-time manner. These can be anything from fans creating character names to full on cameos and sight gags within the show itself.[283]

Examples of this include the character of Derpy Hooves. This is a background character that first appeared in the first episode, and due to an animation error had eyes pointing in two different directions (Fig 21). Fans noticed the grey Pegasus, assigned her a ditzy personality and characteristics based upon her

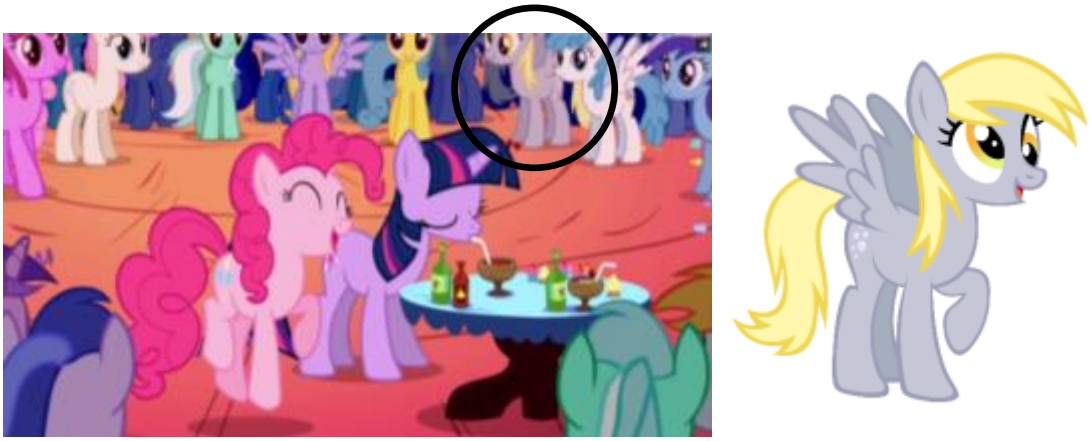


Figure 21 – Derpy Hooves' first appearance (character circled) and subsequent design

[281]Gray, *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts*, 143.
[282] Ibid., 176.
[283] Casey Shreve, "My Little Fan Culture: Ponies Are Epic," *Film Matters* 3, no. 3 (2012): 24.

goofy appearance and christened her Derpy Hooves. She soon became a fan favourite, despite not being an official character, and featured heavily in Brony created fan art and fan fictions. The creative team noticed the interest afforded to the character by Bronies, and began to incorporate her into humorous background scenes as a 'nod' to her fans. For example, in 'Feeling Pinkie Keen', she is shown to be behind a classic cartoon gag.

> When Twilight spies on Pinkie Pie, a series of objects falls on her head: a flower pot, an anvil, a cart of hay and finally a piano. A camera pan reveals that the items were dropped by Derpy and her friend Raindrops, who are hovering next to a movers' truck.[284]

In season 2 these inclusions had become increasingly deliberate, culminating in 'The Last Roundup' (Season 2, Episode 15), where Derpy was finally called by name and given a voice, thereby becoming a fully formed character with her name and characteristics dictated entirely by the Brony audience. Jenkins wrote that creative fan activities such as fan art and fan fiction were used by fans to "incorporate their concerns… [and] better suit their desires."[285] By incorporating characters from Brony fan fictions Hasbro was incorporating the desires of the Bronies into the programme itself, merging content that would

[284]Kate. "My Little Pony News: The Derpy Hooves Controversy." My Little Pony News, 2nd February 2012. http://www.mylittleponynews.com/2012/02/derpy-hooves-controversy.html.
[285]Gray, *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts*, 146.

speak to their target audience with content that would appeal to their accidental one.

Characters that also had been granted status within fan circles, such as background characters that have been given names and backstories in popular fan fictions, were also included in a poster being sold by Hasbro at comic-con. While these characters lack any characterization or plot importance in the television programme itself, they were included in a poster of all season one characters (Fig. 22) due to their importance within the audience.



Figure 22 – The comic-con 2011 poster

This included characters such as Doctor Whoof, Lyra and DJ PON-3 (who was also mentioned at the end of the Equestria Girls promo video). Only background characters that were picked up by the Brony audience were included in the poster, demonstrating that it was a conscious decision by Hasbro to show that they were aware of, and appreciative of, the Bronies'

continued interest in the programme. Furthermore, the positioning of some of the characters referenced popular 'ships', relationships approved of by fans. For example, Lyra and Bon Bon are positioned next to each other in reference to their status as a fan favourite couple. This demonstrates that Hasbro was trying to welcome Bronies into the intended audience of the programme by presenting *MLP:FIM* as a "collaboratively created entity"[286] that responded to its Brony audience's needs and desires.

Not all of the Brony audience could be absorbed, however. As mention previously, the existence of 'clop-clop', sexually explicit material involving the *MLP:FIM* characters, was generally ignored by Hasbro and Faust, and more fan activates legitimised in an attempt to discourage this behaviour and distance it from the Hasbro endorsed Brony audience. In order to reinforce the 'digital enclosure' Suzanne Scott discusses[287], and keep the Brony audience sanitised enough that it would not hurt the brand image of Hasbro, there were occasions where Hasbro decided to overtly manage this material, mainly through the use of 'cease and desist' letters to popular websites that published clop-clop, citing breaches of copyright and intellectual property laws. One example which garnered a lot of attention from the Brony audience was the shutdown of the Tumblr blog, 'Ask Princess Molestia', operated by artist John Joseco. It was described as "a NSFW [not safe for work] ask blog ... It features several running gags, the most central of which is that Princess Celestia is portrayed as perverse

[286]Ibid., 166.

[287]Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture*, 150.

version of her canon self."[288] An ask blog is a blog where tumblr uses submit requests that are responded to with fanart which were, in this case, highly pornographic.[289] A grassroots movement to get the blog shut down was started by Brony PinkiePony, who claims to have started the long-running Brony movement called "Down With Molestia" after her 12-year-old sister ran across the blog while looking for harmless My Little Pony-related material. She is quoted as saying "I don't like a fandom for a little girl's toys to be overrun by men who don't respect women and think they run this town."[290] On January 9th 2014 she emailed Hasbro, drawing their attention to the blog, and on January 17th 2014, three years after the blog started running, it was shut down.[291] Joseco claimed that tumblr removed the blog after receiving a copyright complaint from Hasbro[292] and decided that it was not worth fighting the claim as he had been thinking about ending the blog series anyway. This is not the only instance of Hasbro using copyright claims as a way of shutting down blogs and websites that contained clop-clop and explicit material[293] and demonstrates one of the ways that the industry attempts to contain and remove material they deem unsuitable or harmful to their product and brand.

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[288] Anon, "Ask Princess Molestia", *Tumblr Pony Wiki,* http://tumblrpony.wikia.com/wiki/Ask_Princess_Molestia

[289] Aja Romano, "Brony Community Turns on Teen Girl Accused of Getting a Popular Pony Blog Deleted." *dailydot*, 22nd January 2014 http://www.dailydot.com/fandom/brony-my-little-pony-princess-molestia-deleted/.

[290] Ibid.

[291] Capper General, "Horse News: Breaking News: The "Ask Princess Molestia" Tumblr Is Gone. (Updates)." *Horse News*, January 2014. http://www.horse-news.net/2014/01/breaking-news-ask-princess-molestia.html.

[292] Romano, "Brony Community Turns on Teen Girl Accused of Getting a Popular Pony Blog Deleted."

[293] Ibid.

Jenkins writes that "attempts to regulate intellectual property undercut the economic logic of media convergence, sending fans contradictory messages about how they are supposed to respond to commercial cultures."[294] While Faust had unofficially encouraged the Brony audience to produce fanart, fanfiction and engage with other fan activities, Hasbro used official, legal, channels to dictate what behaviours were acceptable and unacceptable. Derek Johnson writes that:

> The play of consumers within media franchising structures could be described as industrial occupation - both in the sense that consumers take up productive subject positions within the institutions of media industries, and in the sense that as an institutional force those industries increasingly occupy the spaces of collaborative user creation in emerging media environments.[295]

While Hasbro wanted Bronies to become an absorbed audience and help strength the MLP franchise by engaging with the programming, buying the merchandise, and creating their own content, Hasbro only wanted Bronies to act in ways they deemed appropriate for the MLP brand image. Rosemary Coombe writes that "some program producers and network executives celebrate the ongoing involvement of fans in the production of derivative texts, other see such activities as competitive and as threatening to their goodwill. In

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[294] Henry Jenkins, *Fans, Bloggers and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 147.

[295] Johnson, *Media Franchising: Creative License and Collaboration in the Culture Industries*, 198-99.

extreme cases, producers may try to bring fan activities under control [using shutdowns and cease and desist letters]." [296] Hasbro wanted to do both simultaneously, resulting in the targeted shutdowns of specific content, while content deemed suitable was allowed to continue, despite it also technically infringing on copyright and intellectual property laws.

The case of 'Ask Princess Molestia' demonstrates that the process of absorbing the Brony audience was not without its challenges. Hasbro received a significant backlash for their actions from a minority of the audience, as Andrew Sparrow writes, audience members who share content online often "did not have any sense that they were causing hardship or that digital theft was wrong."[297] A number of Brony audience members started 'I quit Hasbro' threads on message boards, explaining why they were so upset with the decision. One Brony wrote:

> So the big uproar of the Internet right now is the Ask Princess Molestia Tumblr being shut down, by Hasbro, who actually sent an email to the creator, to shut it down. First off, even if you don't like the Tumblr, even if you don't like MLP: FIM, this is Bullshit. BULLSHIT... Screw you Hasbro, you had no right, it was parody, and Art which promoted MLP, and promoted it in a better light than some, it was creative, it had adult humour sometimes but it still

[296] Rosemary J. Coombe, *The Cultural Life of Intellectual Properties : Authorship, Appropriation, and the Law*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 128.
[297] Andrew Sparrow, *Film and Television Distribution and the Internet: A Legal Guide for the Industry* (Brookfield: Ashgate Publishing Group, 2008), 34.

> was a promotion to your show, and again, didn't reflect the actual Canon characters. Can you stop getting involved with a show that's doing absolutely fine without you? Because let me tell you, you aren't helping. This was a low move... this is basically a violation of creativity.[298]

This demonstrates that the process of absorbing an accidental audience is not without its limitations and problems. Hasbro wanted to absorb part of the Brony audience, but did not want to legitimise and encourage certain behaviours that some Bronies were partaking in. Hasbro's absorption strategy used Faust as a figurehead to encourage acceptable Brony behaviours and legitimise those audience members that adhered to brand identity of *MLP:FIM,* while Hasbro surreptitiously attempted to silence and shutdown the Brony behaviours that threatened the brand image. This alienated aspects of the Brony audience that enjoyed and partook in those behaviours, meaning that only the acceptable, sanitised version of Bronies were absorbed by Hasbro. While Hasbro did want to absorb the Brony audience, the intended audience of *MLP:FIM* remained 2-11 year old girls, and protecting that audience was more important to Hasbro than encouraging the Brony audience. Although absorbed audiences become part of the intended audience, that does not mean they become the most sought after audience of a programme.

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[298] Anonymous, "The Official 'I Quit Hasbro' Thread," Equestrian Dreamers: My Little Investigations, http://www.equestriandreamers.com/forum/index.php?topic=2980.15.

Conclusion

The story of how Hasbro responded to Bronies demonstrates that accidental audiences can be profitable additions to a programme's target audience. Although Hasbro had spent many years developing their brand around producing toys and products aimed at children, and had carefully cultivated a young female audience for its My Little Pony franchise, they were able to recognise that expanding their target audience could, if handled correctly, be a lucrative business move. Hasbro saw Bronies as a profitable possible market and decided that accepting and conglomerating them with their target audience of 2 – 11 year old girls was a possible course of action. Hasbro's main concerns were ensuring that this new, accidental audience did not damage their or their products', brand identity and make them lose their intended audience. The result was challenging the stereotypes journalists and celebrities, such as Howard Stern, had made of Bronies in the media, and instead framing them, and extension the programme itself, in a positive, empowering light.

Hasbro did not just want to perform media damage control, they actively wanted to cultivate their Brony audience after recognising them as a possible source of revenue. Hasbro introduced merchandise that would appeal to Bronies, and references to the audience were also placed inside the programme itself, making it appeal to the Brony audience without making it unsuitable for young girls. Only certain aspects of the audience could be absorbed, as a certain number of Bronies engaged in behaviours that were

deemed unsuitable and damaging to Hasbro's brand image, which were discouraged through the use of website shutdowns.

This case study has investigated what happens when an accidental audience is seen as a valuable addition to a programme's audience and the creators of the programme it forms around do not view them as harmful to the brand. Hasbro were able to merge their accidental and intended audiences together, after some re-framing of their accidental audience to align it with their brand values, because they work within a commercial televisual marketplace. Further case studies will examine how the different contexts that television programmes exist in affect how accidental audiences are responded to and demonstrate occasions where an accidental audience is viewed negatively and receives a very different reaction.

Chapter Four

The Denied Audience:
Negotiating the Accidental Student Audience of Teletubbies And The BBC

In my previous chapter I discussed the accidental audience that formed around *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* (2010-), known as Bronies. That accidental audience emerged out a commercial television (and toy) context, as *MLP:FIM* was created and developed by Hasbro. In contrast, this chapter explores an accidental adult audience for a television programme within the context of public service broadcasting. Specifically, it will explore the accidental audience of university students that formed around the pre-school programme *Teletubbies* (1997-2001), produced by the BBC. Not only does this case study allow an examination of how the differing industrial context of public service broadcasting can impact and shape the management strategies used to respond to an accidental audience, it also offers an example of an accidental audience that was deemed to be detrimental or unwanted by the programme's creators. The student audience of *Teletubbies,* in this case, became a 'denied' audience; that is an accidental audience dismissed or discouraged from engaging with the programme by its creators.

Similar to my previous chapter on Bronies, this chapter will be divided into three main sections. Firstly, it will establish the intended audience of *Teletubbies.* In order to achieve this, it will examine the status of public service broadcasting and the BBC in the 1990s, where children's television sat within the strategy of the Corporation in this period, and how this influenced the

development and creation of *Teletubbies*. Relating to this last concern, this chapter will examine the approach that the programme's creators, Anne Wood and Andrew Davenport, took in developing an educational children's programme, and how the textual characteristics of *Teletubbies* were specifically designed to appeal to a pre-school audience.

The second section of this chapter will examine some of the reasons that led to the BBC denying their accidental student audience. It will address the two main sets of 'discursive noise' that formed around *Teletubbies*. It will begin by introducing the first set of 'discursive noise', the idea that *Teletubbies* was damaging to children. This discourse focussed on two main news stories, the first being Tinky Winky's perceived homosexuality, and the second was that the Teletubby language was harmful to pre-schoolers development. The section will then introduce the second set of discourses, those that revolved around *Teletubbies'* accidental audience - young adults that were primarily university and college students. In doing so, it will focus on the media-created discourse that developed around this audience, using contemporaneous discursive materials, such as academic journals and news articles, to trace the development of popular public discussion that formed around this accidental audience. While briefly considering the behaviours of this accidental student audience, this section will demonstrate how public discourse around this audience was shaped by news media, and in particular a tendency to exaggerate and embellish the unsavoury behaviours of students to create compelling journalism. It is useful to examine the discursive struggles over

Teletubbies operated in media discourses, because the news is a place where the public value of the BBC is often debated. Commercially-owned press has often used the BBC as a political and ideological target and have used the news as a platform to berate and debate the BBC. This section will, therefore, examine the damaging discourses that circulated around *Teletubbies* and how media stories about the accidental student fed into wider discourses that formed around the programme.

After examining some of the discourses that formed around the programme, this third section will investigate the techniques utilised by the BBC to achieve their aim of discouraging the accidental student audience of *Teletubbies.* It is concerned with the response of the BBC to these media discourses and how the accumulated 'discursive noise' that circulated around the programme forced the BBC to exert effort to either reframe or suppress a number of criticisms that the programme attracted. This leads to an examination of the management strategies the BBC used to respond to the two main sets of discursive noise, looking at how the BBC transformed their accidental audience into a denied audience by utilising website shutdowns and refusing to license adult merchandise. It will contrast how the BBC publicly addressed the discourse that *Teletubbies* was damaging for children, while simultaneously refusing to comment on, or address, the existence of the accidental audience, and the use of silence as a strategy for denying an unwanted audience.

The Public Service of Children's Programming

Before examining *Teletubbies'* accidental audience it is important to first establish the programme's intended audience and the context it was developed in. *Teletubbies* was produced for the BBC, which is a public service broadcaster in the United Kingdom funded through a licence fee. The BBC is governed by a charter and must produce certain genres of programming in order to fulfil its public service remit, and in 1997, the year *Teletubbies* was released, the BBC was in the midst of a moment of transition. This was due to a number of factors, including the political and commercial climate of the late 1980s and 1990s (stemming from key forces such as the 1986 Peacock Committee), the rise of digital technologies and the multi-channel environment, and the rebranding of both the BBC in general and its children's programming specifically. 1997 was, therefore, a transitional moment in how the BBC approached brand creation and management, which would later significantly affect the BBC's response to the programme's accidental student audience.

Due to the BBC's position as a public service broadcaster, and its governing charter, the BBC's offer in the field of children's programming had to achieve specific education aims rather than simply entertain. The BBC began broadcasting children's programming in the 1930s, using programming blocks lasting twenty minutes every Sunday afternoon labelled as 'For the Children.' In 1946 an additional twenty minutes was added called 'For the Very Young'. This demonstrates that children's programming was clearly demarcated within

the BBC's scheduling from its inception, and that children were catered to more explicitly than other niche audiences. This has continued throughout the BBC's history, with the children's block being renamed in 1952 as 'Watch with Mother', which was broadcast every day from 3.45-4pm. The BBC was founded on the principles that broadcasting should be "a social, cultural, educative and moral force. It should entertain, but it is not for entertainment alone; it must also inform and educate."[299] David Oswell has stated that "the BBC aimed to make television 'safe' for children,"[300] meaning that its programming had to have educational value, and also that it should exempt from commercial influences. Maire Messenger Davies states that "the child's role as consumer has been the subject of adult contention since the early days of television."[301] So from its inception children's programming on the BBC was meant to be educationally, not commercially, driven.

During Margaret Thatcher's government (1979-90) the BBC faced pressure to commercialize and privatize. The Peacock Committee (instigated by Thatcher) was a review of the BBC's funding strategies undertaken in 1985. It was to investigate whether the licence fee was an outdated funding model, and whether the BBC could instead fund itself though through commercial business practices. While the report concluded that the licence fee should remain, it also

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[299] Georgia Born, *Uncertain Visions: Birt, Dyke and the Reinvention of the BBC* (London: Vintage, 2004), 27.

[300] David Oswell, "Watching with Mother in the Early 1950s," in *In Front of the Children*, ed. Cary Bazelgette and David Buckingham (London: British Film Institute, 1995), 28.

[301] Maire Messenger Davies, *Dear BBC: Children, Television Storytelling and the Public Sphere* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 98.

suggested that 40% of BBC and ITV programmes should be produced by independent companies rather than in-house.[302] This recommendation resulted in the BBC having to use independent companies, which had their own financial and commercial aims, to produce a number of children's television programmes.[303] The Peacock Committee demonstrates that the role, and funding, of public service television had come under increased scrutiny in the 1980s under a Conservative government and the move to adopt and merge commercial business practices into public service broadcasting was under consideration.

While the broadcaster ultimately retained the licence fee, the 1996 Charter Renewal positioned international broadcasting and commercial development as a new part of the BBC's core purposes[304], demonstrating that marketization and commercial forces continued to shape the way that the BBC had to think about its operations and output. Catherine Johnson writes that:

> From the mid-1990s UK broadcasting policy has actively encouraged the BBC to expand its commercial activities, with the 1996 Royal Charter for the BBC specifically endorsing commercial activities and the development of digital services as core objectives for the corporation. Part of the intention of this Conservative

[302]The Peacock Committee, "The Peacock Report," (1986), 140-51.

[303] For example, the BBC-produced *Play School* (1964-88) was cancelled and the independently produced *Playdays* (1988-97) was commissioned to replace it.

[304] BBC Worldwide, "BBC Worldwide Annual Reports and Accounts 1997/98," (London: BBC, 1998), 2.

> government policy was to allow the BBC to respond to the developments in digital technology without drawing licence fee income away from its core terrestrial service.[305]

This demonstrates the balancing act the BBC faced, as on one hand it had to create public service programming on its terrestrial channels using the licence fee, and on the other it had to use commercial revenue to fund its shift into digital technology. The BBC still had to uphold its 'inform, educate, entertain' principles while competing in a global, commercial (and increasingly digital) market. BBC Worldwide was launched in 1995 to help separate the new commercial activities of the BBC from its public service remit. The subsidiary was formed with the commercial aim to sell BBC programmes and products for broadcast abroad, and uses its income to supplement the BBC licence fee. The self-described mission statement of BBC Worldwide was "to build the BBC's brands, audiences, commercial returns and reputation across the world."[306] However BBC Worldwide had to ensure that any commercial behaviour did not undermine the brand identity of the BBC, which was still intrinsically linked to its public service status. The corporation had to create commercial programming that did not damage or counteract the BBC's reputation or brand image. As Johnson writes:

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[305] Catherine Johnson, "From Brand Congruence to 'Virtuous Cycle': Branding and the Commercialization of Public Service Broadcasting," *Media, Culture and Society* 35, no. 3 (2013): 320.

[306] BBC Worldwide, "Who We Are," BBC, https://www.bbcworldwide.com/about-us/who-we-are/.

> As early as 1988, the BBC was already positioning itself as a corporate brand. Importantly, this corporate brand was not (at this point) articulating commercial value, but rather was positioned in relation to the BBC's public service remit. The BBC corporate brand is here defined as 'quality and service to the public' and the value of its brand is asserted insofar as the BBC is able to maintain its position as the leader in achieving and determining the criteria for both these values.[307]

This is clearly demonstrated in the BBC's 1996 Charter, which states in Section 3, paragraph C, that the BBC (and by extension BBC Worldwide) must:

> Provide sound and television programmes of information, education and entertainment funded by advertisements, subscription, sponsorship, pay-per-view system, or any other means of finance…in…the territorial waters thereof and elsewhere in the world (such services being hereinafter referred to as "the Commercial Services").[308]

David Buckingham has highlighted the paradoxical position of BBC's children's television programming in this context. He argues that, on the one hand, since the 1980s critics and lobby groups have protested the 'dumbing down' of children's programming, which they described as programmes losing their

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[307] Catherine Johnson, *Branding Television* (London: Routledge, 2012), 97.

[308] BBC, "1996 Charter : Objects of the Corporation," (BBC, 1996), Section 3 Paragraph C.

educational value, and that this was a result of the BBC abandoning its public service principles.[309] On the other hand, children's television had become an expanding market, with a multitude of cable and satellite channels becoming available in the UK that attempted to capitalise on the valuable child market. Global networks and conglomeration had also led to integrated marketing strategies and transmedia franchises, where television programmes, toys, video games and books became more intimately connected. In order to fulfil the objectives laid out in the 1996 Charter, the BBC had to expand its commercial developments and branch out into trying to create financially viable franchises and sell programme merchandise. As the BBC continued to lack traditional spot advertisements, it maintained the trust of parents (as they did not have to worry about their children watching advertisements during programme breaks[310]). This absence of programme breaks and competing advertisements allowed the BBC to promote its own new products and merchandise to an undistracted audience.

As the BBC developed its commercial and worldwide services through the 1990s, it also developed its brand identity and sought to transform itself into a 'powerful global brand'. This impacted its children's programming in a number of ways, and from mid-1980s the BBC had been concerned with creating a more concrete, solidified brand for its children's content. In 1985 the block of children's programming was rebranded as 'Children's BBC' and for the first time

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[309] David Buckingham, "Blurring the Boundaries: Teletubbies and Children's Media Today," *Internationl Central Institute for Youth and Educational Television (IZI)* 12, no. 2 (1999).
[310] Ibid.

the children's block had dedicated idents and an in-vision presenter, Philip Schofield presenting from the Broom Cupboard. During the 1990s, Children's BBC began to be referred to informally on-air as 'CBBC'. The official billing name of Children's BBC remained in place until the BBC's network-wide branding refresh of October 1997, when the official on-air branding changed to CBBC. Indeed, 1997 was a key moment when the BBC was trying to sell its brands overseas and also prepare for the transition into the digital age. This meant that the BBC was not only concerned with what the BBC brand was going to represent, but also how its children's brand was going to operate in this transitional climate.

This specific context within the BBC's children's programming impacted the development and creation of *Teletubbies* in a number of important ways. Due to the increasing importance of the BBC's commercial division, the programme had to be designed in a way that would create a range of possible ancillary products that would help create revenue. In addition, as the BBC had begun to operate globally since the advent of BBC Worldwide, *Teletubbies* was created with the intention that it could be sold to overseas markets. Nevertheless, while the BBC had to adopt commercial tactics and business practices, its children's department had to resist this change in order to continue to treat children as "a potential citizen who needs to be informed, stimulated, included in the social world,"[311] rather than as a consumer. *Teletubbies* had to offer enough entertainment value that children would want to watch it and have a

[311] Messenger Davies, *Dear BBC: Children, Television Storytelling and the Public Sphere*, 102.

commercial value that could be exploited, while remaining educational enough that parents and the British public would not view the programme as being overly commercial.

Teletubbies began its broadcast in 1997, the same year the BBC was rebranding its children's television content. *Teletubbies* was one of the first programmes broadcast during the new CBBC block, so it had to reinforce the brand image the BBC wanted for its children's programming. *Teletubbies* was produced at a time when the BBC was very concerned with how its children's television content was being received, both by its child audience and their parents. With the 1998 launch of BBC Choice, the first digital only channel, the BBC was also considering creating dedicated digital children's channels (subsequently launching CBBC and CBeebies in 2002, which were dedicated to broadcasting children's programming for pre-school children on CBeebies and older children on CBBC). While these channels launched after *Teletubbies* had finished, they are important because *Teletubbies* fell within the transition period, when children's programming was about to be moved off the main BBC channels and onto its own dedicated channels. The planning for these digital channels began in 1996, pre-*Teletubbies,* when the BBC's new marketing plan began to focus on 'needs-mapping', described by Georgina Born as "an experimental research project designed to understand the needs of audiences, so as to serve them better."[312] This focus on market research and audience needs led the BBC to focus on children's programming when creating their digital channels, as the

[312] Born, *Uncertain Visions: Birt, Dyke and the Reinvention of the BBC*, 259.

BBC themselves had described children as a "harder to reach audience group."[313] So, while the CBBC and CBeebies channels had not yet been created and launched, the BBC was concerned with the content and reception of its children's programming and was attempting to ensure it had a strong and cohesive brand identity.

Teletubbies

In 1996 the BBC was looking to produce new children's content, specifically a programme that would appeal to the pre-school audience aged between one and four years old. They invited pitches from a number of different independent companies, including Ragdoll Productions, which was founded in 1984 by Anne Wood, a former school teacher, and Andrew Davenport, a trained speech therapist, who went on to create the programme *Teletubbies.* Anne Wood's philosophy has been described as "child-centred"[314], as she argued that children's television should 'take the child's point of view', which has been articulated through *Teletubbies'* in a number of different ways. This section will examine how the character design, setting, language and storylines of *Teletubbies* were designed to not only appeal to the programme's pre-school audience, but also satisfy the BBC's remit for children's programming.

[313] BBC, *Building Public Value: Renewing the BBC for a Digital World* (London: BBC, 2004), 94.
[314] Buckingham, "Blurring the Boundaries: Teletubbies and Children's Media Today."

The programme revolved around the adventures of four Teletubbies, Tinky Winky, who is purple, Dipsy, who is green, Laa-Laa, who is yellow, and Po, who is red. In the show, the Teletubbies play in the cheerful and fun Teletubbyland. They perform activities familiar to their pre-school audiences, such as rolling on the ground, laughing, running around, and watching real children on the televisions on their stomachs. The creation and aesthetics of the final characters were heavily influenced by the rise of digital technologies. As Anne Wood explained, "we were interested in how children were reacting to the increasingly technological environment of the late 1990s."[315] The importance of technology would become a driving theme throughout the programme, as Wood and Davenport wanted to provide a programme that would help pre-school children begin to navigate the digital world they were growing up in.[316] This resulted in Wood and Davenport incorporating technology into the character's physiology in order to reflect the increasingly important role technology had in the lives of children. It also had a secondary purpose, as Davenport explained:

> Part of the BBC's brief was to include live-action pictures of children. This presented problems. Tinky Winky was 8ft 6in tall so the Teletubbies would have seemed like monsters to kids. So I put TVs on to their tummies: I was entertained by the idea that the

[315] Ibid.

[316] Nicholas Mirzoeff, "Teletubbies: Infant Cyborg Desire and the Fear of Global Visual Culture," in *Planet Tv: A Global Television Reader*, ed. Lisa Parks and Shanti Kumar (London: New York University Press, 2003), 440.

> Teletubbies watch children on their screens with the same fascination that children watch Teletubbies on theirs.[317]

This shows that, indirectly, the BBC had a significant impact on the design of the main characters. Wood and Davenport had to continually ensure that *Teletubbies* would fulfil the BBC's aims for the programme, which included strengthening the brand identity the BBC wanted for its children's content, and preparing not only the corporation but also its audiences for the new advances in digital television and technology.

Importantly, the programme also had to appeal to children, so it had to be aesthetically interesting. This meant the characters were also designed to be colourful and visually stimulating. Davenport has said that he got the idea of the design of the *Teletubbies* through watching clips of the moon landings, stating that:

> I was fascinated by the moon landings. It struck me as funny that, at this pinnacle of human achievement, the figures that emerged in bulky spacesuits from landing capsules are like toddlers, with oversized heads and foreshortened legs – and they respond to the excitement of their new world by bouncing about. So I devised characters based on spacemen.[318]

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[317] Anna Tims, "How We Made: Teletubbies, an Interview with Anne Wood and Andrew Davenport." *The Guardian*, 3rd June 2013. https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2013/jun/03/how-we-made-teletubbies.

[318] Ibid.

Wood also speaks of this influence, saying that "Andrew [Davenport] had been amused at how astronauts looked like toddlers in nappies." [319] The main characters of *Teletubbies* ended up looking like colourful spacemen with the proportions of toddlers (Fig 23), the programme's intended audience. As mentioned earlier, the ability to create ancillary merchandising was one of the programme's commercial aims, and puppets and animated characters create greater opportunities for merchandising than real actors. [320] The similarly designed but differently coloured main cast would be ideally proportioned to



Figure 23 - The Teletubby Characters from left to right: Po, Laa-laa, Dipsy and Tinky-Winky

become children's toys and were similar enough to use the same design (cutting down on production costs), but different enough that children would want more than one to 'complete the set.' [321] However the most important factor was the fact that the programme's pre-school audience would recognise

[319] Ibid.

[320] Due to their iconic design and the ability to turn them into recognisable toy versions of themselves.

[321] Buckingham, "Blurring the Boundaries: Teletubbies and Children's Media Today."

their own movements in how the Teletubbies moved. Nicholas Mirzoeff argues that one of the reasons the programme was so popular with its audience was the fact that it:

> Acknowledges the spectatorship of infants as infants. This is perhaps the first moment in which the infant perceives the culture hailing it as a member of that culture. Or to put it in Louis Althusser's terms, *Teletubbies* interpolates infants as subjects.[322]

The fact that the Teletubbies looked and moved like the toddlers viewing was a carefully considered move by Davenport and Wood to involve their viewers in the programme and encourage them to join in with the actions of the Teletubby characters.

The setting of *Teletubbies* was also carefully designed to appeal to a pre-school audience. Teletubbyland is visually exciting, with green grass and brightly coloured flowers, bunny rabbits and the sounds of birds, and the Teletubbies themselves live in the Tubbytronic Superdome alongside their sentient vacuum cleaner Noo-noo. Wood had envisaged Teletubbyland as a "cross between the land where television comes from and a nursery rhyme land,"[323] and the narrator of each episode begins with the fairy tale opening of "Over the hills and far away, Teletubbies come to play". Filmed on location in Warwickshire farmland, Teletubbyland was a mix of familiar (such as the recognisable animals

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[322] Mirzoeff, "Teletubbies: Infant Cyborg Desire and the Fear of Global Visual Culture," 451.

[323] Anne Wood, "Making Teletubbies – Its Child's Play." *BBC*, 23rd April 2007. http://www.bbc.co.uk/education/teletubbbies/information/pressrelease.

and setting) and alien (the Teletubbies themselves). This mixture aimed to simultaneously spark and engage the programme viewers' imaginations,[324] but also be familiar enough to engage them cognitively,[325] thereby furthering the aims of the programme to educate and entertain its pre-school viewers.

Another important feature off Teletubbyland is the lack of any visual authority figures. The Teletubbies roam free around the countryside to have adventures that are not dictated by any adult or human characters. Sarah Lyall writes that in Teletubbyland "anarchy often reigns, and the ruling principle is affection"[326] rather than education or order. The closest thing to an overseer in Teletubbyland is the voice-over, which acts as narrator and ends the programme by telling the Teletubbies to say goodbye to their audience. In this regard it appears to have a level of authority, but, as Mette Jensen argues, "the voice-over…can be categorised as a framing, heterodiegetic voice-over,"[327] because it introduces the main story but at no point actually acts as a character or impacts the storyline of the episode. It merely narrates, rather than dictates, the Teletubbies' actions. The only other character that could possibly act as an authority figure is the baby-faced sun, which looks down on the Teletubbies and laughs at their adventures, but again has no impact over their actions or behaviour. Nicholas Mirzoeff describes Teletubbyland as an 'infant's utopia', in

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[324] Saoirse Docherty, "5 Reasons Why Fairy Tales Are Good for Children." *Scottish Book Trust*, June 2014 http://www.scottishbooktrust.com/blog/reading/2014/06/5-reasons-why-fairy-tales-are-good-for-children.

[325] Karen Everhart, "Eh-Oh!" Current, 2nd February 1998. http://current.org/1998/02/eh-oh/.

[326] Sarah Lyall, "Teletubbies," in *The New York Times Guide to the Best Children's Videos*, ed. Ranny Levy (New York: Pocket Books, 1999), 13.

[327] Mette Støttrup Jensen, "The Teletubbies, Hyperreality and Narcissism," (Allborg Universitet Thesis, 2000).

which the "infants [Teletubbies] are comfortably in charge of their…environment."[328] So not only is Teletubbyland colourful and vibrant, it is also a land of freedom and playfulness without boundaries (Fig 24).



Figure 24- Teletubbyland

Alongside the bright coloured characters and setting, *Teletubbies* also entertained and educated its target audience through its language. One of the most famous aspects of the programme is the Teletubby language, which consists of short, simplified sentences and repeated words[329], which its viewers are encouraged to mimic. Davenport, a trained speech therapist, stated that "The Teletubbies are loved by toddlers because they are comical baby characters – so they speak a playful language based on the early speech of a young child. To toddlers, these words carry as much meaning as normal words"[330]. He further rationalised this decision to create a 'play language' by

[328] Mirzoeff, "Teletubbies: Infant Cyborg Desire and the Fear of Global Visual Culture," 440.
[329] Helen Cowie, *From Birth to Sixteen: Children's Health, Social, Emotional and Linguistic Development* (New York: Routledge, 2012).
[330] Anon, "Why Do Toddlers Love Teletubbies So Much?," Baby World, http://babyworld.co.uk/2011/05/why-do-toddlers-love-teletubbies-so-much/.

explaining that "Everybody can understand it and it encourages toddlers to join in and talk back. Teletubbies help toddlers to be relaxed about this [developing language skills]." Anne Wood added that "Toddlers find the Teletubbies attempts to speak funny – which makes them confident enough to join in. Our experience has taught us that toddlers play games with voices and this is how they learn to communicate.'[331] So the Teletubby language fulfilled a multitude of purposes. Firstly, it entertained and amused the programme's pre-school audience, making them want to watch the programme, and secondly it fulfilled an educational aim by helping them develop language skills from an early age.

Just as the *Teletubbies* themselves were based on toddler proportions, and their language based on children's first attempts at talking, the storylines and episodes were also based on toddler behaviour. Kenn Viselman, president of Itsy-Bitsy Entertainment Company who distributed the programme in the US, described the programme saying: "The premise of the show is that it's about the celebration of play. What we try to do is get the children engaged, give them really funny bits, and while they're engaged, we can challenge them, give them questions and raise their curiosity and get them to take risks."[332] Anne Wood argues that children, and especially very young children such as the *Teletubbies'* intended audience, do not learn through instruction, but through play, and that if you want a young child to learn they must have fun whilst doing so. The Teletubbies, therefore, used simple concepts, repetition, stories, songs

[331] Ibid.

[332] Lyall, "Teletubbies," 12.

and games to engage with and encourage active participation from toddlers on their own terms. The combination of toddler proportions, language and activity allowed the pre-school audience to view Teletubbies as their peers[333] and Debbie Mode even suggested that "for many toddlers, the Teletubbies are their first friends."[334] If the child audience felt fondly towards the characters and saw them as their friends they would be more likely to watch and engage with the programme each day.

The production and filming of *Teletubbies* also reinforced the idea that the Teletubbies were the audience's friends or peers. The camera angles are low, mimicking the viewpoint of a small child, so the pre-school audience watched the action on the television the same way as they would in person. The characters looked directly into the camera and occasionally spoke in a way which directly included the viewer into the storyline of the episode, and encouraged them to 'talk back' to the characters on screen. Each episode takes place over the course of a day, beginning with the sun rising and ending with it setting. This allows a lengthy opening and closing section to each episode where the characters, one by one, say hello (or Eh-oh) to the audience at the start of the episode and say bye-bye at the end. The pre-school viewers of the programme can interpret the sun's laughter and the Teletubbies' greetings as

[333] Ibid., 14.

[334] Anon, "Why Do Toddlers Love Teletubbies So Much?"

being directed to them through this format, making them more likely to enjoy and engage with the programme.[335]

The *Teletubbies* were cleverly designed to appeal and relate to the intended pre-school audience of the programme. Their appearance and behaviour were designed to not only be visually and aesthetically stimulating, but also encourage their child viewers to participate and engage with the characters so their language and cognitive skills could develop, fulfilling the programme's public service remit. These factors did not just appeal to the programme's intended audience, as the programme began to attract a wider audience that were drawn to the programme' aesthetics and style.

Discursively Creating the Accidental Audience

Teletubbies received widespread critical attention and journalistic interest and due to its popularity and success *Teletubbies* became a discursively noisy programme. Many different aspects of the programme were dissected and analysed by the media and this level of scrutiny led to a number of controversies arising around the programme. In fact, the media discourses around the programme were so prolific and widespread that Anne White wrote an academic paper dedicated to examining the "hype, hysteria and hearsay in

[335] David Buckingham, *Children Talking Television: The Making of Television Literacy* (London: The Falmer Press, 1993), 227-28.

press coverage of a popular cultural phenomenon."[336] This section will examine the two main sets of 'discursive noise' that circulated around *Teletubbies* that became an issue for the BBC because they risked the suitability of *Teletubbies* as a children's franchise. It will begin by examining the first set of 'discursive noise', that insinuated *Teletubbies* was not suitable for its pre-school audience, focussing on the two main stories that drove this discourse. The first was the inappropriateness of Tinky Winky's supposed homosexuality and the second focussing on the argument that the Teletubby language damaged pre-schoolers development. A second set of discourses then arose from this context, as it emerged that while *Teletubbies* was carefully designed to educate and entertain a pre-school audience, it soon became apparent that other audiences – notably a student audience – were engaging with the programme, which became a source of media attention. This development was also presented negatively, as the main discourses that formed around this audience presented them as either immature, unwilling to be responsible adults, or as drug users.

This section is concerned with exploring how these discourses were formed and will achieve this by looking how this audience was written about by the contemporaneous media and academics and briefly mentioning the behaviour of *Teletubbies'* accidental student audience that may have reinforced these discourses. It will explore the idea that the accidental audience of *Teletubbies*

[336] Anne M. White, "Telling Tales About "Teletubbies": Hype, Hysteria and Heresay in Press Coverage of a Popular Cultural Phenomenon," *International Central Institute for Youth and Educational Television (IZI)* 2, no. 12 (1999).

was problematic for the BBC not because of their behaviours, but because of the way the discourses framed them as problematic and the language used created insidious assumptions that became affiliated with both *Teletubbies* and the BBC. It will ultimately argue that the controversial accidental audience of *Teletubbies* was primarily a product not of behaviours, but of discourse.

Teletubbies first aired on the 31st of March 1997. Initially the programme received very little attention from the press, as one might expect from a programme aimed at pre-schoolers that aired in an early morning slot. It quickly became a critical and commercial success in the UK, winning a BAFTA for best pre-school programme in 1998. The programme received much attention in BBC Worldwide's first Annual Report (1997/1998) and was their most successful export during the year.[337] This success continued into the following year, where it was also classed as the number 1 highlight of the year in the 1998/99 Annual Report, with the caption:

> Teletubbies- revenues from this year's leading brand, Teletubbies, reached a record £32m. Teletubbies can now be seen in 120 countries and territories and in 20 languages. In a landmark deal, Tomy will distribute BBC-sourced Teletubbies toys made in Asia to the Japanese market.[338]

[337] Worldwide, "BBC Worldwide Annual Reports and Accounts 1997/98," 5.
[338] BBC Worldwide, "BBC Worldwide Annual Reports and Accounts 1998/99," (London: BBC, 1999), 4.

The programme soon became one of the BBC's most profitable new shows, with the programme fulfilling its aim of being sold overseas, where the bulk of the programme remained the same except for the live-action segments within the Teletubbies' stomach televisions, which was localised for specific regions.[339] It is also apparent that there was a lucrative market for merchandise and ancillary products which was expanding, as the show had just broken into the Japanese market. *Teletubbies* was, seemingly, a successful programme that was extremely popular with its target, pre-school audience. While the programme won multiple international industry awards during the first year of its release, such as the 24th Grand Prix Japan Prize in the International Education Programme Contest in Tokyo[340], most of the BBC Worldwide's annual report focuses on its commercial successes and awards, rather than its public service remit. In fact, in no official BBC Annual Report is there a reference to *Teletubbies* succeeding in helping children develop language or technological skills, the focus is purely on the programme's commercial success and popularity with its intended audience.[341]

Teletubbies received media attention before it had even been broadcast, as Anne White argues that the programme faced its first controversy when the *Radio Times* published several letters accusing the BBC, and by extension *Teletubbies,* of "cultural vandalism" for cancelling the programme *Playdays*

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[339] "Teletubbies (Show)," Teletubbies Wikia, http://teletubbies.wikia.com/wiki/Teletubbies_(Show).

[340] Worldwide, "BBC Worldwide Annual Reports and Accounts 1997/98," 3.

[341] This will be referred to and expanded on later when discussing some of the other controversies that formed around the programme.

(1988-97), which they described as "a defining experience in the development of a whole generation"[342] to make way for *Teletubbies.* Bryan Appleyard, writer for *The Sunday Times,* also compared the programme negatively to its predecessor, stating that:

> With even a Labour Government finally acknowledging that something had gone badly wrong with state education, along comes the BBC with a children's show in which fat furry babies giggle and talk in proto-language. The show it replaced – Playdays – had clear, educational content, Teletubbies looked like a mad, infantilised wallow.[343]

This particular criticism was short lived, as the programme inspired a number of new controversies after it began airing, including the sexuality of Tinky Winky. Each Teletubby had been assigned a particular object that they regularly played and interacted with; Dipsy had a hat, Laa-Laa had a ball, Po had a scooter, and Tinky Winky had a red bag. The reason this inspired media controversy was due to the fact Tinky Winky was generally assumed to be male, and his bag resembled a woman's handbag. The media began to take an interest in this particular fact after Jerry Falwell, a former spokesman for America's Moral Majority[344], galvanised this particular journalistic discourse when he denounced the programme in an article entitled *Parents Alert: Tinky*

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[342] Henry Wickers, "Say It Again!," *The Guardian*, 26 August 1997, 12.
[343] Bryan Appleyard, "Meeting the Teletubbies," *The Sunday Times* October 12th 1997.
[344] An American political party that was closely associated with the Republican Party and the Christian right that aimed to mobilise Republican Americans.

Winky Comes Out of the Closet. In the article he wrote that, alongside Tinky Winky's use of a handbag, "he is purple - the gay-pride colour; and his antenna is shaped like a triangle - the gay-pride symbol."[345] This controversial discourse was generally treated humorously by the British press, with *The Guardian* ending their article on the subject with "Tinky Winky was unavailable for comment but Po said 'Uh-oh'," [346] and *The Herald Scotland* opening its article with "Is it the love that dares not babble its name? Is it time for Tinky Winky to come out of the toy closet?"[347] The controversy was taken more seriously in the US. As the BBC was trying to sell its products worldwide, it did not just matter how its programmes were received in the UK, but also how they were received in the global marketplace, and this discourse threatened the programme's attractiveness as a worldwide export, especially in more politically conservative countries.

[345] Anon. "'Gay Tinky Winky Bad for Children'," BBC News, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/276677.stm.
[346] Michael Ellison, "Tinky Winky Falls Foul of the Moral Majority." *The Guardian*, 11th February 1999. http://www.theguardian.com/world/1999/feb/11/michaelellison.
[347] Anon "He's Not Straight-Talking but Is Tinky Winky Kinky?," The Herald, http://www.heraldscotland.com/news/12356364.He_apos_s_not_straight_talking_but_is_Tinky_Winky_kinky_/.



Figure 25- Tinky Winky and his controversial red bag

Arguably the most damaging discourse the BBC had to respond to was centred around the Teletubby language, and the effects it had on the programme's pre-school audience. Designed to try and encourage its young audience to vocalise and begin to utilise spoken language, many academics and child development professionals spoke out against the Teletubby language, arguing that it either taught young children bad habits or did not have an impact on language development at all. The inarticulacy of the Teletubbies was constantly linked with the idea that children's television was being 'dumbed-down' in media and journalistic rhetoric. Journalist Susan Linn wrote in 2001 that:

> What's worrisome about *Teletubbies* is that, to date, there is no evidence to support its producers' claims that the program is educational for one-year-olds. There is no research showing that the program helps babies learn to talk. There's none to suggest that it facilitates motor development in 12-month-olds. There is no data to substantiate the claim that young children need to learn to

> become comfortable with technology. In fact, there is no documented evidence that *Teletubbies* has any educational value at all.[348]

This sentiment was repeated, in various states of hyperbole, throughout the mainstream British and US press, with Maggie Brown writing that:

> Parents are angry that the Teletubbies don't talk properly; they say they are slow, silly, banal and incoherent, and that the programme is aimed at children who are really too young to be watching TV at all.[349]

The Guardian journalist was suggesting that this was not merely a controversy among journalists and academics, but parents were also critical of the Teletubby language. It was not just the Teletubby's on-air language that caused controversy. Also in 1998 a number of retailers in the US removed talking Teletubbies plush dolls from their shelves due to complaints that "the Po doll was saying offensive words, specifically either 'fatty' or 'faggot,'"[350] although Hasbro, the company responsible for the production of the toys, insisted that the noise was actually the gibberish word 'fidit', they started to implement the use of language cards, inserting one into each doll's box to familiarize people

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[348] Susan Linn and Alvin Poussaint, "The Trouble with Teletubbies." *The American Prospect*, 1st May 1999. http://prospect.org/article/trouble-teletubbies.
[349] Maggie Brown, "Parents: A Spot of Tubby Trouble." *The Guardian*, 25th August 1997.
[350] Charlotte Runcie, "Teletubbies: 16 Things You Didn't Know." *The Telegraph*, 24th December 2014. http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/tvandradio/10903566/Teletubbies-16-things-you-didnt-know.html.

with the Teletubby language[351] and reduce any confusion about what each toy was saying.

Despite these controversies *Teletubbies* was still well received by its pre-school audience. However, it was not only popular with its intended audience. In 1997 the BBC claimed that *Teletubbies* had a UK audience of 2 million[352], but if under-fours are not included in ratings figures, then who were the people watching *Teletubbies?* Pre-schoolers and their parent(s) were not the only audience engaging with *Teletubbies;* the programme had also amassed an accidental audience that consisted mainly of university and college students in their late teens and early twenties. While this chapter is primarily focussed on the university students who formed part of this accidental audience, there is evidence that even younger teenagers, those in secondary school, were also engaging with the programme. David Buckingham wrote of finding that in secondary schools "*Teletubbies* regalia often adorned…students' exercise books and bags" [353] suggesting that the accidental student audience of *Teletubbies* expanded beyond the university campus. Nonetheless, I am going to focus on university students in this chapter, as most press attention focussed on this demographic, meaning they were the most prominent accidental audience within broader public and cultural discourse. This student audience

[351] Laura Ernde, "Teletubbies Popular Despite Controversy." *Herald Mail*, 28th November 1998.
[352] Andy Medhurst and Jill Parkin, "Again, Again! Why Students Can't Get Enough of Them." *TES*, 24th October 1997, https://www.tes.com/news/tes-archive/tes-publication/again-again-why-students-cant-get-enough-them.
[353] Buckingham, "Blurring the Boundaries: Teletubbies and Children's Media Today."

principally communicated on university campuses and on online message boards and was primarily made up on Western students, led by UK students, as they had access to the programme first, with US students joining later on when the programme made it across the Atlantic on the 6th of April 1998.[354] This section will now look at the construction of the discourse that formed around this accidental audience and how this discourse influenced the general public's perception of the programme.

The earliest articles discussing this accidental student audience referenced university societies. In 1997 Jill Parkin wrote about the Teletubby characters appearing on posters for club nights at the University of Brighton and University of Warwick students plotting to find and visit 'Teletubbyland', the secret location where the programme was filmed.[355] Frank Furedi anecdotally wrote of being on a campus and "encounter[ing] a group of undergraduates absorbed in watching Teletubbies in the bar."[356] So social environments and public areas comprised one area where this accidental audience operated. Andy Medhurst reinforced this when he wrote about this phenomenon in 1997, saying that "It's a social thing, too: it would be a sad person who would sit down to watch a cult programme on his own."[357] The first mentions of this accidental audience intrinsically linked it was universities and socially active students. This

[354] "Teletubbies (Show)," Teletubbies Wikia, http://teletubbies.wikia.com/wiki/Teletubbies_(Show).
[355] Medhurst and Parkin, "Again, Again! Why Students Can't Get Enough of Them.."
[356] Frank Furedi, "The Children Who Won't Grow Up: Peter Pan-Demonium, Kidults, Boomerang Kids.... A Sociologist Examines the Phenomenon of Lost Boys and Girls Hanging out on the Edge of Adulthood.": *Spiked*, 29th June 2001..
[357] Medhurst and Parkin, "Again, Again! Why Students Can't Get Enough of Them.."

meant that the accidental audience was also linked with other university behaviours, such as drinking and partying, which became increasingly central to the framing of this accidental audience. The accidental student audience began to be referenced in a wide range of media outlets. Paul McCann from *The Independent* wrote in 1997 that "Teletubbies [is] now much more than 'only' a children's television programme,"[358] *The Barstow Press* writing that the programme was both "worshipped and reviled by college students,"[359] and *The Bangor Daily News* stating in 1998 that "college students will soon turn the show into a party game ('drink when you see the Baby Sun')"[360]. Even the programme's Wikipedia page contains a reference to this accidental student audience, stating that:

> Although the programme is aimed at children between the ages of one and four, it had a substantial cult following with older generations, mainly university and college students. The mixture of bright colours, unusual designs, repetitive non-verbal dialogue, ritualistic format, and the occasional forays into physical comedy appealed to many who perceived the programme as having psychedelic qualities.[361]

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[358] Paul McCann, "T To Teletubby or Not to Teletubby." *The Independent*, 12th October 1997. P2-7

[359] "Britain's Teletubbies Offer Anti-Barney Message," *The Barstow Press* 1998, 2.

[360] Dale McGarrigle, "Bizarre New Show Likely to Find Fans: Teletubbies Takes Tots on Adventures." *Bangor Daily News*, 1st December 1998, 33-34.

[361] "Teletubbies: Cult Following," Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Teletubbies#Cult_following.

While not a credible source, this does demonstrate how knowledge of *Teletubbies'* accidental student audience was widespread, became a part of popular culture, and was generally accepted as fact amongst the general public.

Shortly after the first articles about the student audience of *Teletubbies* were published, specific discourses began to form around them. The first set of discursive noise began when a number of journalistic and academic articles postulated that the students were using the programme as 'come-down', or 'hangover' television. David Buckingham wrote that:

> Perhaps the ultimate seal of youth cultural approval [for *Teletubbies*] was granted in July 1997, when the leading style magazine *The Face* ran a five-page story on "Teleclubbers." Watching *Teletubbies*, it asserted, was now the coolest accompaniment to "post club comedown," as young ravers unwind from the chemically induced frenzy of the previous night.[362]

Academic studies that examined how students read *Teletubbies* concluded that drugs were an important aspect of the programme in multiple ways. Not only were the *Teletubbies* themselves on drugs (having been supplied by the windmill on the hill who distributed drugs through the air), but also that "drugs are needed for any adult to be motivated to watch the programme."[363] So drugs were discursively positioned as both an aspect of the programme itself

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[362] Buckingham, "Blurring the Boundaries: Teletubbies and Children's Media Today."

[363] Gregory Gutenko, "Deconstructing" Teletubbies": Differences between UK and US College Students' Reading of the Children's Television Program." Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Communication Association, Ontario Canada, June 2-5th 1998, p11

and an aspect of the programme's consumption by its accidental student audience.

Due to the illicit nature of this practice it was widely reported on by the British press, with Stuart Miller from *The Guardian* writing in 1997 that *Teletubbies* was "now slavishly followed by a generation of stoned students"[364] and Tim Footman stating that "late night soul searching in the halls of residence now revolves around the drug symbolism of Tubbytoast and whether that baby in the sun is, like, y'know, God or something."[365] Kate Kellaway from *The Observer* also wrote that "the programme is a favourite with students because it looks like a psychedelic hallucination." [366] These journalists even referenced academic studies into this audience to try and lend more credence to their claims; with Francis Wheen stating that "the consensus among Tubby scholars [is] that the show is a druggy fantasy."[367] This discourse spread to the US, where *Teletubbies* was exported in 1998. Sarah Lyall, from the *Sarasota Herald-Tribune,* wrote that:

> Teen-agers, according to hip magazines for the young, like to come from all-night ecstasy-fuelled raves, switch on 'Teletubbies' (the series is shown early on weekday and Sunday mornings) and deconstruct what they see as encoded druggie messages, as if it

[364] Stuart Miller, "Boo Hoo at Tinky Winky's Bye Bye." *The Guardian*, 28th July 1997., 3.
[365] Tim Footman, "For the Love of Bod," Ibid., 12.
[366] Kate Kellaway, "Eh-Oh Laa Laa!" *The Observer*, 25th May 1997, 20.
[367] Francis Wheen, "Wheen's World," *The Guardian* 1997, 5.

were the 1960s and they were listening to 'Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds'.[368]

The rhetoric of this particular discourse reinforced an impression of drug taking being a leading behaviour of this accidental audience, regardless of reality.[369] The image of a drug-taking student audience provides a basis on why this audience was ultimately denied by the BBC. As previously discussed, the BBC was going through a period of rebranding and press coverage or articles about how their children's programming was appealing to drug addicts or 'stoners' would potentially damage their child-focussed brand image.

This discourse was reinforced by the behaviours of some of the student audience themselves. If members of the wider public used the internet to find any information about the *Teletubbies,* they could also find the shared online spaces that this audience used to communicate amongst itself, such as forums, chatrooms and websites. Unfortunately, due to the passage of time and the actions of the BBC[370], many of these websites no longer exist. However, a number do remain that demonstrate what content these sites contained and the types of readings and behaviours they were encouraging. Created by the accidental student audience of *Teletubbies,* these websites would offer alternative character and storyline interpretations and often included drug

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[368] Sarah Lyall, "Television; Tubbies Say, 'Eh-Oh.' Parents Say, 'Uh-Oh.'." *The New York Times*, 1st November 1998.

[369] Gutenko, "Deconstructing" Teletubbies": Differences between UK and US College Students' Reading of the Children's Television Program." Annual Meeting of the Canadian Communication Association, Ottawa, June 2 – 5th

[370] Which will be expanded on later in the chapter but included mass website shutdowns

references. One example is *A Beginners Guide to Teletubbies,*[371] which was a popular website created in 1997 and is still available to view through archives. It gives the following as its introduction: "This is meant to be a useful guide to Teletubbies, for anyone who is not a regular viewer and has not yet found the drug induced wonder of Teletubbyland."[372] It also offers an outline of the episode format:

> Most episodes follow a similar format, revolving around various simple, but classic, storylines. The typical format is as follows:
>
> Intro: Having taken some speed, the Teletubbies race around their landscape, hugging each other, etc.
>
> Act I: Teletubbies wander around stoned, hugging each other, etc. - until they are called by The Windmill. At this point, their indoor aerials start picking up TV. One lucky 'Tubby is chosen to be the host.
>
> Interval: Boring educational bit. 'Tubbies ask to see it again. Boring educational bit, again.
>
> Act II: The main storyline usually takes place here. This is often based upon a normal object being transported from the underworld into Teletubbyland, where the Teletubbies find it,

[371] Anon. "Teletubbies: A Beginners Guide," Grocities, http://www.geocities.ws/Colosseum/Track/9534/teletubbies/intro.htm.
[372] Ibid.

> wander around stoned, hugging each other, etc. - until they are called by The Windmill. After The Windmill has sprayed LSD across the landscape, the 'Tubbies have a hallucination
>
> Epilogue: The underground dwellers tell the Teletubbies that it is "Time for Tubby-Bye-Bye" and the 'Tubbies say goodbye. Three times each. They do have some excellent waves, though.[373]

It is clear to see that this website aimed to present an alternative reading of *Teletubbies* to its visitors, one that was based upon gratuitous drug use. While the press and academics were the driving force behind cultivating and circulating this discourse, the accidental audience itself was lending some credibility to these claims and reinforcing this particular discourse and view of the accidental audience.

Another discourse, primarily created by academics, presented a different theory as to why students were watching *Teletubbies.* Andy Medhurst, for example, was sceptical that students were only consuming *Teletubbies* when using (or coming down from) drugs, stating that:

> I think students mainly are watching it as part of breakfast TV. It's about the time they're getting up. But I suppose the Sunday omnibus edition could be used for coming down after Saturday night party drugs. It's happy, comforting stuff.[374]

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[373] Ibid.

[374] Medhurst and Parkin, "Again, Again! Why Students Can't Get Enough of Them.."

While Medhurst does not entirely dismiss the students' drug use, he does imply that they were driven to the programme because it was 'comforting' rather that hypnotic. This is reinforced by student Robin Brinkley, who said that:

> I love it because it is so simplistic and innocent – like me. It is so refreshing compared to things like *Casualty* and *Homicide* which I don't enjoy watching at all. No blood, guts, bonking or gore. Just brightness and fun.[375]

Some academics argued that students were drawn to the programme because of its innocence and simplicity.[376] Mirzoeff argues that the adoption of *Teletubbies* by this audience was an act of nonconformity and that it was a part of the global youth fashion for the infantile that is "usually interpreted as a mix of regression and denial."[377] Buckingham also considers this reasoning for why the student audience formed around *Teletubbies*, arguing that "The success of 'Teletubbies' with young people and adults could be seen as a form of regression or infantilisation – or at least, further evidence of the blurring of boundaries between children and adults."[378] The sense of freedom and abandonment cultivated by the series that was designed to appeal to its pre-school audience seemed to also appeal to the student demographic. Medhurst also called it an "ironic regression. They're playing at being childish."[379] He also offers an explanation that the popularity of the programme, and the general

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[375] Ibid.

[376] Echoing the appeal of *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*

[377] Mirzoeff, "Teletubbies: Infant Cyborg Desire and the Fear of Global Visual Culture," 452.

[378] Buckingham, "Blurring the Boundaries: Teletubbies and Children's Media Today."

[379] Medhurst and Parkin, "Again, Again! Why Students Can't Get Enough of Them.."

rise in popularity of “retro TV” in general, was a reflection of the increasing sense of irony that permeated popular culture in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

While this discourse did not focus on the use of illegal substances and behaviours, and may be viewed as a less damaging discourse, the language used by these academics still presented a negative image of this audience, describing them as childish and immature. While this discourse was less prolific in the press, it was still present. Writing for *Spiked Magazine,* Frank Furedi likened the student audience of *Teletubbies* to his two-year-old son, stating that “I had made a futile effort to wean my son off the Teletubbies by offering him some more challenging visual alternatives. It didn’t work – and I was struck by the thought that it wouldn’t work with these 21-year–olds either.”[380] As the *Teletubbies* became available in the US, Andrew Shtulman wrote that their popularity in the UK was perhaps due to the fact that “the Teletubbies have succeeded not only in dumbing-down toddlers but in dumbing-down the rest of the population as well.”[381] Although they did not use drugs, this accidental audience was still presented negatively and, similarly to Bronies, was described as being childish or immature. Mirzoeff in particular, with his use of the words ‘regression’ and ‘denial’, presented this audience as being unable, or unwilling, to act as adults.

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[380] Furedi.

[381] Andrew Shtulman, "Teletubbies Take over Nation's Children, Adults." *The Daily Princetonian*, 1998.

This discourse was enhanced by some of the programme's accidental audience publically announcing that this was how they gained enjoyment from the text. Some students described watching the programme as having a "comforting, mindless, 'return to the womb', 'like being a kid again' appeal."[382] A popular fan created website, created by three teenage A level students from Bradford, entitled *The *Baby-Boy* report on the Teletubbies* aimed to present the authors' theories on the three types of *Teletubbies* fans. They argue the first is the programme's intended audience, pre-school children, but most discursively driving are their ideas on the second and third types of fans.

> The second type of Teletubbies fan are adults who think that the program has a sweet, uplifting, happy outlook to offer those who are worn down by the trials of everyday life. People in this category have no Social Skills problems, but find the Teletubbies an interesting distraction, and something to be enjoyed. It also gives many people an interesting twist to their personalities. This category, I think, includes many students and members of Oliver's mailing list. It also includes the three authors of this report.
>
> THIS TYPE OF TELETUBBIES FAN LIKES THE PROGRAM AND ITS ASSOCIATED MERCHANDISE BECAUSE OF ITS HAPPY AND UPLIFTING OUTLOOK ON LIFE.[383]

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[382] Gutenko, "Deconstructing" Teletubbies": Differences between UK and US College Students' Reading of the Children's Television Program," 10.
[383] Baby Boy, Austin, and Lob, "The *Baby Boy* Report on the Teletubbies," http://www.angelfire.com/la/babyboyz/report.html.

The authors of the website classed themselves as Type 2 fans, and included the following statement on the website explaining their own thoughts and feelings on the programme:

> We all watch Teletubbies at 7:15 am whenever we can. We think it's a really good way to start the day, because the program is happy, upbeat, and uplifting. This is why we like it. When we are feeling tired and unwilling to face another day, Teletubbies does an excellent job of lifting our spirits with its innocent and lively outlook on life.[384]

While agreeing with the popular discourse that they watched and engaged with the programme in order to escape their adult responsibilities, they framed their behaviour, and by extension the programme itself, positively, insisting that this behaviour was innocent rather than sinister. Notably, the third type of fan that they describe fuels the media and academic discourse that adult fans of the *Teletubbies* are unable to act like true adults, or are unwilling to grow up, as it suggests a significant amount of adult fans of the programme lack social skills:

> A lot of readers will have seen the Here and Now program about toy mania. This told of a man who was desperately obsessed with Teletubbies, and more specifically, Teletubbies Toys. The man went into a shop, and on discovering that there were no Tubby dolls left,

[384]Ibid.

> he desperately pulled a knife on the cashier. This is the third type of Teletubbies "fan" - an obsessive who can think of nothing else. Lacking the social skills to make friends in the real world, he attaches to the Teletubbies because of their lack of inhibition and universal acceptance. The Teletubbies are always happy, something that the class 3 Teletubbies fan seldom is. To compensate for this, he will buy any merchandise going that has the Teletubbies name on it. He won't be able to think of anything else, in an attempt to share this happiness.
>
> This type of Teletubbies fan likes the program and its associated merchandise because he lacks the social skills to make friends and tries to share the Teletubbies' happiness.[385]

This interpretation and reading of adult fans of the programme, by other fans, reinforced the negative media and academic discourses around this accidental audience, as it framed them as socially inept and unable or unwilling to cope with adult life. Due to the fact this was a public website, this interpretation of the accidental audience by the accidental audience helped reinforce the negative stereotypes presented by the media.

Due to its popularity and success *Teletubbies* became the focus of media scrutiny, which resulted in it becoming a 'discursively noisy' programme. Out of this context, the accidental student audience was negatively discussed and

[385] Ibid.

framed by the media and academics, resulting in it being perceived by the BBC as a threat to the new brand image the BBC were trying to cultivate. Alongside the accidental audience another discourse had formed, that was seen as a risk to the viability of *Teletubbies* as a worldwide children's franchise.

The Denied Audience

This third section is concerned with the response of the BBC to the media discourses set out in the previous section and how the accumulated 'discursive noise' that circulated around the programme forced the BBC to choose which discourses would be publically challenged and reframed and which needed to be suppressed in order to keep control of the public's perception of *Teletubbies.* The first set of discursive noise that surrounded the programme threatened its attractiveness as a worldwide children's export, so the BBC had to reframe these discourses to diminish the risk they presented to *Teletubbies'* suitability as a children's intellectual property. In contrast, the language used by the media and academics when discussing the accidental student audience of *Teletubbies* created insidious assumptions about the accidental audience, which became attached to both *Teletubbies* as a programme and the BBC as a corporation. The accidental student audience threatened to destabilise the brand of both programme and corporation due to the 'discursive noise' that was presenting them as a problematic audience. This discursive loading of the accidental student audience, as immature drug users, meant that the BBC felt

unable to absorb this audience during a time of rebranding and instead decided to transform the accidental student audience into a denied audience.

As mentioned previously, the BBC was also undergoing a rebranding strategy in preparation for digital technologies becoming more widespread. In particular, two of the four new digital channels launched by the corporation in early 2002 were dedicated to children's programming, CBeebies and CBBC. These channels were described by the BBC as "Distinctive, safe, educational and entertaining British television for 2-5 year olds and 6-12 year olds respectively."[386] The use of the word 'safe' is repeated when the BBC writes about the CBBC Club House, a website that was launched along with the channel and was described as:

> A pilot website where children from schools across Britain can make friends and talk about topics that interest them. Children can join and start clubs of their own and create a page about themselves, in a safe online environment.[387]

The online forum would be linked with programme information about shows broadcast on the CBBC and CBeebies channels. The BBC was interested in creating a community for their child audience, where they could safely interact with their peers. This meant the BBC was aiming to create a 'child-only' space, free from (overt) adult interference. If adults and students were interacting and engaging with the CBBC and CBeebies programming then they might also

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[386] BBC, *Building Public Value: Renewing the BBC for a Digital World*, 93.
[387] Ibid., 78.

engage with the websites, which could have jeopardised the BBC's 'safe space for children' branding.

The BBC decided that the most feasible course of action to protect themselves against the negative discourses surrounding *Teletubbies'* accidental student audience, and the insidious assumptions that could become attached to the programme and by extension the corporation, was to suppress the audience and transform them into a denied audience. To achieve this aim, the BBC took a number of steps.

Firstly, they refused to license any official *Teletubbies* merchandise that would actively appeal to the student audience more than the pre-school audience, so no adult clothing was officially licensed. While this did not actively suppress the accidental student audience, it did reinforce the fact the BBC did not view them as part of the intended audience of the programme. Jonathan Gray has written on how paratexts, such as merchandise, are "now part of the text", and that "paratextuality creates a well-fashioned image of all that the [text] represents."[388] He goes on to state that paratexts can "control our entrance to texts."[389] By denying the student audience suitable paratexts to engage with, the BBC is denying them entry into the 'wider world' of *Teletubbies.* While Hasbro produced Brony targeted merchandise to cultivate their accidental audience by using it to demonstrate their appreciation and acceptance of Bronies, the BBC's refusal to produce merchandise for the student audience

[388] Gray, *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts*, 38.
[389] Ibid., 40.

sent the message that they were not accepted or recognised by the BBC, and were not invited to engage with the text on a deeper, more involved level. This strategy ignored the accidental student audience of *Teletubbies,* rather than discouraged them. Notably, when taken in conjunction with the other strategies used by the BBC, it demonstrates how the BBC tried to deny the accidental student audience without actively engaging with them, which would validate this audience in the eyes of the press.

Secondly, in order to actively discourage the student audience, the BBC attempted to shut down the websites used by the students, which would decrease their visibility to the press and the public by removing one of the main ways the, now denied, audience communicated and spread. While the BBC could not control how students engaged with *Teletubbies,* they could use Intellectual Property as a weapon, as it was something they could control. It demonstrated the BBC's disapproval and displeasure of how the accidental student audience was appropriating the programme, without publicly engaging with them and drawing more media attention to these unapproved behaviours. Rosemary Coombe has written on the complex relationship that can form between corporate producers and fans when executives view fan uses of source texts as "competitive and […] threatening to their goodwill."[390] Henry Jenkins has also explored historical examples of producers trying to control fan publications and magazines, writing on Lucasfilm's attempts to control *Star*

[390] Rosemary J. Coombe, *The Cultural Life of Intellectual Properties : Authorship, Appropriation, and the Law*, Post-Contemporary Interventions (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 128.

Wars publications, and stating that "Lucas…threatened to prosecute editors who published works that violated the "family values" associated with the original films."[391] This practice of using copyright to curb unattractive fan behaviours has a precedent, having been used previously against magazines in the pre-digital age when corporations saw the fan behaviour exhibited as either competition and redirecting money away from official channels, or as too potentially damaging to the 'values' and brand associated with the text. In regard to *Teletubbies* the BBC was concerned with the fan websites violating the child orientated image of both the CBBC and *Teletubbies,* and used website shutdowns as a way of both reducing the possible spread of unsuitable content, and as a way of demonstrating to the accidental student audience that they were not a welcome addition to the audience of *Teletubbies.*

In the case of *Teletubbies,* kournalist Francis Wheen criticised the BBC's handling of the shut downs and the "fusillade of electronic grapeshot"[392] which the organisation's lawyers sent out to denied audience members running websites devoted to *Teletubbies*, threatening legal action in connection with alleged breaches of copyright and intellectual property law. In addition, he relates how website editors advancing what were judged to be unorthodox opinions about the meaning of *Teletubbies* were cautioned about the dangers of "compromising the programme's intentions."[393] Wheen labelled the BBC's

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[391] Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers : Television Fans & Participatory Culture*, Studies in Culture and Communication (New York: Routledge, 1992), 30-31.
[392] Wheen, "Wheen's world," 5.
[393] Ibid.

action as “bullying” and described the fate of the denied audience as “capitulated at once... so (their) small but thriving corner of cyberspace... is now a sad sepulchre of nervous disclaimers and blank pages.” [394] This demonstrates that the BBC utilised mass website shutdowns, which were both extensive and successful, resulting in many of the shared online spaces this student audience operated within no longer being available to them. This would have hindered this audience’s growth significantly, as there were no longer as many websites that would introduce new viewers to the popular student readings of the programme and less places for this audience to communicate amongst itself. It would also limit this audience’s exposure to the wider public and minimise the number of sources that academics and journalists could draw on when commenting on this denied audience, making it a harder audience to study and engage with. This decreased the number of both academic and media articles written on the student audience, so public interest and awareness of them and their behaviours would decrease over time. This was a more direct strategy to deny the accidental audience, as it clearly demonstrates that the BBC was aware of the student audience and their websites and shows that the BBC did not want students engaging with the programme the way they had been. By attempting to shut down student-led websites about *Teletubbies,* the BBC was sending a clear message that this audience was not welcomed or accepted, they were denied.

[394] Ibid.

Thirdly, the BBC also refused to publicly discuss the student audience and confirm their existence, as speaking publicly about the accidental audience would prove its existence in the press and lend credence to the undesirable discourses circulating about their behaviours. This rhetoric of silence contrasted with how the BBC responded to the second set of discourses that circulated around *Teletubbies,* those that threatened the programme's suitability and value for its child audience. The claims that Tinky Winky was homosexual and that the Teletubby language damaged children's development were directly addressed and responded to by the BBC in order to alleviate the concerns raised by parents, journalists and academics and reframe the potentially damaging discourses.

To combat the Tinky Winky controversy in the US Steve Rice, a spokesman for Itsy Bitsy Entertainment, which licenses the Teletubbies in the US, made a direct and confrontational statement that directly addressed the criticism aimed at Tinky Winky in order to reframe this discourse as a ridiculous reading of the programme, rather than the intention. The US press release stated that:

> The fact that he carries a magic bag doesn't make him gay. It's a children's show, folks. To think we would be putting sexual innuendo in a children's show is kind of outlandish. To out a Teletubby in a pre-school show is kind of sad on his part. I really find it absurd and kind of offensive.[395]

[395] "'Gay Tinky Winky Bad for Children'."

This attempt to reframe this particular discourse was successful and *Teletubbies* continued to be successfully broadcast in the US. While the BBC did not release this particular statement, they were concerned with how the programme was being discursively framed and discussed in the US. This meant that this discourse had to be addressed even in the UK in order to establish the controversy as 'ridiculous', so the BBC released a statement stating that:

> This is not the first time that people have read symbolism into a children's TV programme and it probably won't be the last. As far as we are concerned Tinky Winky is simply a sweet, technological baby with a magic bag.[396]

This particular discourse was then firmly addressed and reframed and the controversy soon disappeared from journalistic and academic articles, meaning it was no longer a threat to either the BBC's brand or the programme's international appeal.

In regards to the discourse addressing the Teletubby language, the BBC had to address the controversy in 1998, writing that "Their baby-talk way of communicating, using the sounds 'Eh- oh' and 'Uh oh', found the way into the hearts and minds of many children. But some educationalists have expressed concern about their effect on children's learning."[397] In order to combat the claim that the Teletubby language damaged pre-schooler's development, Anna

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[396] Ibid.

[397] "Teletubbies Pad out BBC Sales," BBC Online Network, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/131808.stm.

Home, head of BBC's Children's Programming, responded to this discourse, with placation stating that "there is a need to put in more traditional speech"[398] and announced that new *Teletubbies* episodes were going to contain more 'traditional language'. Those who had criticised the Teletubby language had seen the development as a 'victory'[399] and a move against the 'dumbing down' of children's television. Home's closing statement, however, contained a subtle criticism of her own, as she stated "The children who grew up watching '*Clangers*' … didn't grow up into a generation of whistlers".[400] While, as mentioned previously, the *Teletubbies* had been praised for its commercial achievements multiple times, it had not been praised for any educational achievements, and instead its educational value had been questioned and attacked. As a public service broadcaster the BBC's children's programming, alongside its adult programme, had to adhere to its 'inform, educate, entertain' principles, and it was important that the BBC responded to any arguments questioning the programme's ability to educate and ensure the public continued to trust the broadcasters' ability to create television programming beneficial for their children. This critical discourse was, therefore, responded to by Home with subtle acquiescence and a promise to make the language more traditional, without actually admitting any fault with the original language.

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[398] Paul McCann, "Teletubbies to Get Grown-up Help with Their Baby Talk." *The Independant*, 24th August 1997. http://www.independent.co.uk/news/teletubbies-to-get-grown-up-help-with-their-baby-talk-1247240.html.

[399] White, "Telling Tales About "Teletubbies": Hype, Hysteria and Heresay in Press Coverage of a Popular Cultural Phenomenon."

[400] McCann, "Teletubbies to Get Grown-up Help with Their Baby Talk."

While these discourses did not have a huge impact on the popularity of *Teletubbies,* as it continued to be one of BBC Worldwide's most profitable franchises, they did demand attention and a response from the Corporation as they threatened the suitability of *Teletubbies* as a children's intellectual property. Due to the BBC's status as a public service broadcaster they had to remain aware of the public discourses surrounding their programming and act accordingly to ensure their programmes were not negatively affected by media and journalistic controversies. Because these controversies focussed on the suitability of *Teletubbies* for its intended pre-school audience they had to be addressed and countered to ensure parents still allowed their children to engage with the programme. The controversy surrounding the programme's accidental student audience, while still receiving media attention, did not threaten to damage the programme's educational aims or the corporation's public service reputation. This meant that the BBC did not have to counter the journalist discourses surrounding students and could instead suppress and deny the accidental audience rather than try to discursively reframe them. The contrast between the public engagement with the discourses that threatened *Teletubbies'* suitability as a children's franchise and the lack of public acknowledgement of the accidental audience demonstrate how the BBC used the media as a way to draw attention away from the accidental audience and invalidate them. Ultimately, the lack of adult-orientated merchandise and media engagement by the BBC show how the corporation was unwilling to acknowledge and encourage the accidental student audience of *Teletubbies.* The website shutdowns demonstrate how the Corporation actively tried to

discourage and suppress them, transforming the accidental student audience into a denied audience.

Conclusion

The case study of *Teletubbies* has allowed an exploration of how public service broadcasters, specifically the BBC, responded to and managed an accidental audience. Because of the BBC's public service identity and agenda, the corporation's response to the accidental student audience of *Teletubbies* differed significantly from Hasbro's response to Bronies. The specific timing of *Teletubbies* was important, because the programme was created and realised during a transitional period for the BBC. Due to the UK's political climate and technological advancements, the corporation was trying to reinforce its public service brand identity during a time of increasing commercialisation. Due to its reliance on the public licence fee, the BBC was more concerned with communicating its updated brand image and reputation than commercially profiting from its accidental student audience. This resulted in the student audience of *Teletubbies* becoming a denied audience, an audience that is actively discouraged or ignored by the creators of the programme it formed around.

This case study has also demonstrated how it is not necessarily the accidental audience itself that has to be managed and controlled, but the discourses that circulate around that audience. Again, due to the BBC's role as a public service broadcaster they had to ensure that public opinion remained favourable, in

order to continue to emphasise its sense of public value and ensure that it could defend its public service identity and funding rationale. This meant that they had to respond to the negative and damaging academic and journalist construction of the accidental audience, even if it was exaggerated. The BBC's response was dictated by the negative, hyperbolic discourses created and circulated by the media, rather than the actual actions and behaviours of the accidental student audience. In order to achieve their aim of transforming the accidental audience into a denied audience, the BBC utilised website shutdowns, a lack of student focussed merchandise and paratexts, and a rhetoric of silence to demonstrate to the students that they were not a welcomed addition to *Teletubbies* audience and their behaviours and actions would not be accepted or tolerated.

The previous chapter explored a positively received accidental audience with a commercial television context and *Teletubbies* provides an example of a negatively received accidental audience, due to the public service context of its producers and creators. Nevertheless it is not as simple as commercial contexts resulting in an absorbed audience and a public service resulting in a denied audience. Chapter 5 will demonstrate this by exploring the example of *Sesame Street* and examining how an accidental audience is responded to when its existence straddles these two televisual contexts.

Chapter Five

Can you tell me how to get to the Accidental Audience of Sesame Street?: Navigating Public Service and Commercial Tensions

Chapter Three discussed the absorbed Brony audience of *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*, and Chapter Four discussed the denied audience of *Teletubbie*s. Both of these accidental audiences received a lot of publicity and were vocal online communities that coalesced in online public spaces. Nonetheless, accidental audiences are not always vocal, controversial and visible. This chapter will present an accidental audience that is more discreet and gradual in both the way it has developed over time and the manner in which it has been managed – the accidental adult audience for *Sesame Street* (1969-).

This accidental adult audience for *Sesame Street* provides another example of a viewership that formed around a programme designed to appeal to children. However, it differs significantly from Bronies and *Teletubbies*. The Brony community developed within the space of a few weeks among a large vocal online community that demanded attention and a reaction from Hasbro. Equally, the press attention granted to the student audience of *Teletubbies* forced the BBC to manage the public perception of their brand swiftly. In contrast, the accidental audience of adults watching and engaging with *Sesame Street* developed over a longer historical period, has received less media and academic attention, and emerged out of a messier, more complex situation.

Sesame Street was born out of a merger between the public service and commercial television environment, which complicates the aims and management of the programme. In the case of *Sesame Street,* the accidental audience consists of adults, some of which were parents of the intended pre-school audience and therefore anticipated as a by-product of the intended pre-school audience by the Children's Television Workshop (CTW). This adult audience, however, became a larger, more prevalent audience that consisted of more than just the pre-school parent audience. In this case, the adult audience is accidental because of how they engaged with and responded to the programme, which changed *Sesame Street's* cultural status from an educational pre-school programme to a popular cultural phenomenon. While less primary evidence is available than in the previous case study chapters, what can be evidenced is the changing cultural status that *Sesame Street* assumed in the early 1970s, when it moved beyond simply being a pre-school educational television programme. This chapter will illuminate this shift as a basis for understanding the identification, development and cultivation of an adult audience for a programme originally designed for pre-school children.

Structurally, this case study will be split into three main sections. The aim of the first section is to examine how *Sesame Street* expanded beyond its original public service aims as an educational pre-school programme and became part of wider televisual culture. To achieve this, the first section will investigate the original intended pre-school audience of the programme and how the text was specifically designed to attract and appeal to this audience. It will then go on

to explore how the combination of the CTW's public service aims merged with Jim Henson's Muppets and their established commercial aims and intended adult audience, to complicate the actual initial audience of *Sesame Street.* This led to the programme having an accidental adult audience and extending beyond the confines of children's television in its identity, appeal and status in popular culture. This section will trace these developments and their impacts from the programme's release in 1969 to 1971, using events such as the Emmy awards and guest starring roles on variety programmes to explore the widening popular cultural status of *Sesame Street* and its characters.

The second section of this chapter is concerned with examining how the CTW responded to the programme's accidental audience and how the CTW started to incorporate *Sesame Street'*s accidental adult audience into the intended audience resulting in it transforming into an 'absorbed audience'. It will explore the impact that another Henson project, *The Muppet Show* (1975-1981), had on the adult viewers of *Sesame Street* and how after the former's cancellation the CTW adopted certain stylistic aspects of *The Muppet Show* (1975-81) into *Sesame Street* in order to cultivate to accidental adult audience of *Sesame Street* and merge it with the programme's intended pre-school audience.

The final section will then examine how the CTW started to capitalise on the adult audience of *Sesame Street,* both commercially and politically, from 1994. It will look at *Sesame Street's* development into a commercial media franchise and how the adult audience becoming multifaceted (with an 'aged-up' audience of adults who originally watched the programme as children) has

allowed the CTW to utilise the changing media technologies to target specific content at their adult audience. This section will also engage with how having an adult audience has aided *Sesame Street* politically and look at Newt Gingrich's attacks on public service broadcasting in 1994 and Mitt Romney's in 2012, as specific events where the adult audience of *Sesame Street* helped the programme remain on air.

Establishing *Sesame Street's* Dual Contexts and Initial Reception

This section of the chapter will establish *Sesame Street's* intended audience and public service aims and how the CTW initially positioned parents as a by-product[401] of their intended pre-school audience. It will then examine how this anticipated, but not intended, parent audience exceeded the CTW's expectations and became an accidental audience, allowing *Sesame Street* to develop beyond its educational aims. I will argue that this is due, in part, to the commercial history of Jim Henson's previous work with the Muppet characters and the previous intended adult audience Henson had cultivated for his creations. Methodologically this section will focus on the 1970 Emmy awards and the Muppets guest starring on other programmes to provide evidence of *Sesame Street* breaking out of the 'ghetto' of children's television and its wider status within popular culture within the first two years of its broadcast.

[401] Although the term by-product is not generally associated with audiences, in this context I am using it to describe an audience which was anticipated but not intended.

Firstly, I will look at the initial production of *Sesame Street.* It is important to establish both *Sesame Street* and its production company, the Children's Television Workshop, in order to identify the public service aims of the programme. In 1966 television producer Joan Ganz Cooney was hosting a dinner party, when Lloyd Morrisett[402] remarked, "Do you think television could be used to teach young children?" Cooney replied, "I don't know, but I'd like to talk about it."[403] This catalyst led to Cooney creating a report entitled "The Potential Uses of Television in Preschool Education" in 1967 and establishing the Children's Television Workshop to create educational television programming for children in 1968, as a reaction against the environment of children's television in the US at the time. Most children's programming was regarded as overly commercialised, produced with low budgets and violent content, and bombarded with commercials for toy and products,[404] such as the WB produced *Looney Tunes* (1942-70) and the Hanna Barbera produced *Tom and Jerry* (1940-2008). Founder of Boston's Action for Children's Television group, Evelyn Sanderson, described Saturday morning cartoons - one of the only television genres created specifically for a child audience - as "merely fill-ins between a string of commercials."[405] If, as this comment suggests, the US children's media landscape was seen to be over-commercialized, Cooney wanted to offer an alternative. In her report, Cooney implored television

[402] An executive at Carnegie Corporation, a funding body which aimed "to promote the advancement and diffusion of knowledge and understanding".

[403] Michael Davis, *Street Gang: The Complete History of Sesame Street* (New York: Penguin Books, 2008), 16.

[404] Wylie, "'Sesame Street' Opens the Door," 112.

[405] Anon, "TV's Switched on School," *Newsweek* 1970, 71.

executives to think about approaching children's television from a public service perspective. She said in her address,

> The best estimates indicate that during the hours of 5 to 6 P.M. sixty per cent of your audience is composed of children under twelve. And most young children today, believe it or not, spend as much time watching television as they do in the schoolroom. I repeat -- let that sink in, ladies and gentlemen -- most young children today spend as much time watching television as they do in the schoolroom. It used to be said that there were three great influences on a child: home, school, and church. Today, there is a fourth great influence and you ladies and gentlemen in this room control it.[406]

Cooney rhetorically linked television with school and family, framing it as a hugely important factor in a child's life. This speech demonstrates that in the 1960s young children were heavily engaged with television and that it had the potential to have as much power over children as their parents and religion. Cooney continued,

> Is there no room on television to teach, to inform, to uplift, to stretch, to enlarge the capacities of our children? Is there no room for programs deepening their understanding of children in other lands? Is there no room for a children's news show explaining

[406] Newton Minow, "Television and the Public Interest." Presented at the *National Association of Broadcasters*. Washington D.C., 9th May 1961..

> something to them about the world at their level of understanding? Is there no room for reading the great literature of the past, for teaching them the great traditions of freedom? There are some fine children's shows, but they are drowned out in the massive doses of cartoons, violence, and more violence. Must these be your trademarks? Search your consciences and see if you cannot offer more to your young beneficiaries whose future you guide so many hours each and every day.[407]

Cooney saw the large role television played in children's lives and the influence it could have. Rather than commercialise or monetise children's television, Cooney recognised the potential of television to act as an educator, to be a positive factor in the lives of young children (specifically pre-school children between the ages of 2 and 4) in order to help prepare them from further schooling and social situations. Her report managed to convince a number of sponsors including the Carnegie Corporation and the US government to invest in the project and air it on PBS (then known as NET). Thus the Children's Television Workshop (CTW) was founded and production on *Sesame Street* began.

The CTW aimed to "[bridge] the gap between 'advantaged' and 'disadvantaged' U.S. children."[408] Resultantly *Sesame Street* was designed to

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[407] Ibid.

[408] Edward L. Palmer and Shalom M. Fisch, "The Beginnings of Sesame Street Research," in *"G" Is for Growing: Thirty Years of Research on Children and Sesame Street*, ed. Shalom M. Fisch and Rosemarie T. Truglio (New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Publishers, 2001), 10.,

help young children, especially those from low-income families and disadvantaged backgrounds, prepare for school.[409] This target demographic of disadvantaged pre-school children was generally found in inner cities, as the percentage of low-income families was higher in cities than the suburbs and children from inner cities generally had fewer educational opportunities. Ideologically, *Sesame Street's* target audience - the audience that Cooney and the CTW most wanted to watch and engage with the programme - was children of both genders between the ages of 2 and 4 from disadvantaged inner city neighbourhoods. Nevertheless, Cooney did not want to make programming at the expense of children from other socio-economic backgrounds and the CTW recognized that in order for the programme to appeal to their specific intended audience it would inevitably have to appeal to all pre-school children, regardless of their socio-economic background. Therefore, while the ideological focus of *Sesame Street* was disadvantaged pre-schoolers, the intended audience of the programme was pre-school American children, regardless of their gender, location or socio-economic background.

The CTW had identified *Sesame Street's* intended audience and the next challenge was developing methods to achieve their aim of appealing to a pre-school child audience while incorporating educational content. Edward Palmer notes that the main "concern was that if this document [the curriculum], with all its educational jargon, set the tone for the series, *Sesame Street* would be

[409] Anna Palmer, "The 'Street' That Changed Everything," *American Psychological Association* 34, no. 9 (2003).

terribly dull instead of light and lively."[410] *Sesame Street* had to fulfil its education agenda while keeping its young audience entertained and interested. In order to achieve this balance, it was decided the programme's format would revolve around repetition and short six-minute segments. There would be an over-arching simplistic storyline in each episode[411] comprised of between 10 and 15 scenes, with segments consisting of songs, animations and sketches (ranging from live action human characters, to Muppet characters, to hand drawn animation) appearing between each scene, with the final programme running for a total of one hour. The segments that appeared between story scenes would be repeated in different episodes, to ensure their audience would be exposed to them multiple times as the CTW's prior research had concluded that children learn best through repetition.[412] This format allowed the producers a large amount of flexibility to remove, repeat, add or modify segments depending on the goal of the episode. This has been referred to as a 'magazine' format[413], where the style of each segment would change in order to keep the programme visually stimulating. *Sesame Street* would also utilise exciting audio and visual cues to keep its young audience entertained, lively music, sound effects, peculiar voices and audio changes,[414] while the

[410] Palmer and Fisch, "The Beginnings of Sesame Street Research," 10.

[411] For example, in episode 4 Gordon, Susan and Bob run Mr Hooper's store for a day.

[412] Gerald S. Lesser and Joel Schneider, "Creation and Evolution of the Sesame Street Curriculum," *Fisch and Truglio* (2001).

[413] Aaron Calbreath-Frasieur, "Muppet Madness: Coherence, Contingency and Chaos in the Media Franchise" (PhD Thesis, University of Nottingham, 2013), 12.

[414] Dafna Lemish, "Viewers in Diapers: The Early Development of Television Viewing," in *Natural Audiences: Qualitive Research of Media Uses and Effects*, ed. Thomas R Lindlof (New Jersey: Ablex, 1987), 44.

colourful Muppet characters themselves provided a lot of the visual entertainment needed to keep pre-school children interested in the programme.[415]



Figure 26 – The Sesame Street set

In order to target their inner-city demographic, *Sesame Street* was also set on an inner-city street (Fig 26), with the reasoning that children from similar environments would appreciate seeing a location similar to their homes onscreen.[416] Director Jon Stone stated that in order for the programme to make sense to disadvantaged children it could not be "just another escapist show set in a tree house or a badger den."[417] The set of *Sesame Street* was, "a realistic city street, complete with peeling paint, alleys, front stoops, and metal

[415] Gerald S. Lesser, *Children and Television : Lessons from Sesame Street*, (New York: Random House, 1974), 16.
[416] "Sesame Street (Location)," Muppet Wiki, http://muppet.wikia.com/wiki/Sesame_Street_(location).
[417] Peter Hellman, "Sesame Street Smart: How Big Bird and Co. Do It," *New York Magazine: Special Issue City Child* 1987, 52.

trash cans along the sidewalk,"[418] that the majority of the programme's disadvantaged child audience could call home.[419]

The cast of *Sesame Street* was also carefully designed in order to reinforce the programme's appeal. The recurring human cast was comprised primarily of adults, rather than children, and was multi-ethnic in order to act as role models for a diverse range of children. In season one the recurring human characters were Gordon and Susan, an African-American couple; Mr. Hooper, a Jewish shopkeeper; Bob, a Caucasian music teacher; Jennie, an independent, artistic, young Caucasian woman; and the Caucasian comedy duo Buddy and Jim who featured primarily within their own segments. While these characters hailed from a diverse range of backgrounds, they were not intended to be the characters that the child viewers would identify with.[420] Instead the Muppet characters acted as audience surrogates. While technically ageless, most of the programme's Muppet characters embodied a child-like trait or mannerism and would question the human, adult, characters about different subjects and try to learn about the world. For example, one of *Sesame Street's* most famous characters, Big Bird, was described by his performer Caroll Spinney as, "The too-big kid ... I suggested that we think of him as a child first learning to read and learning the alphabet, like our audience. That made him about 4½."[421] Other recurring Muppet characters in season one included Grover, who was

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[418] Ibid.

[419] Ibid.

[420] Maggie Savoy, "Joan Cooney: The TV Producer Who Made Waves: Sesame Street Her Answer to Challenge of Teaching Via Tube," *Los Angeles Times,* 10th November 1970, 22.

[421] ""The Wisdom of Big Bird"," Muppet Central News, http://www.muppetcentral.com/news/2003/042703.shtml.=

always having imaginary adventures and the unnamed Cookie Monster, who "often played the role of a toddler who got in the way of everything without thinking, acting fussy when he didn't get his way, and was scolded whenever he ate Kermit's property during lectures."[422] Each of these examples had a trait or behaviour that would allow a pre-school child audience member to identify and relate to them, thus increasing their appeal to this young audience.

Sesame Street and the CTW were certain about who the intended audience for the programme was and the public service it would provide for pre-school children. Nevertheless, the CTW was aware that when dealing with children and children's products that there was a very important audience they had to consider: parents. *Sesame Street* broadcast twice a day, first shown at 11.30am and repeated at 4.30pm[423], so childless adults and parents of older children would be at work, but stay-at-home and non-working parents would be at home and in charge of their child's activities and television viewing habits. In order to have access to its child viewers, *Sesame Street* had to attract their parents and Chamber stated that "We design[ed] the show to engage the parent because we know that's more educational. If you have a parent watching with you, you're going to learn much more."[424] *Sesame Street* was designed to encourage co-viewing and make parents watch the programme alongside their children, not only to ensure exposure to their child audience,

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[422] "Cookie Monster," Muppet Wiki, http://muppet.wikia.com/wiki/Cookie_Monster.

[423]Les Brown, "'Sesame Street' Dazzles in Television Premiere," *Variety*, 24th December 1969

[424] Alberto Rodriguez, "Sesame Street Turns 45!" *People TV Watch*, 3rd November 2014. http://people.com/tv/sesame-street-turns-45/.

but also to maximise the education and skills they could teach their target audience. As documented by Gerald Lesser in 1974,

> No single set of television programs, or any other single educational approach, can be expected to produce a substantial effect by itself, unless the experiences are tied to other aspects of the child's life. Whenever a parent or an older sibling talks with the young child about what they have seen or done together and encourages him to elaborate upon the experience, a multiplier effect is set into motion. Even just keeping a young child company while he watches a television program probably has its own reinforcing properties, since it represents a rather uncommon sign of crediting his activities by the parent or older sibling.[425]

This meant that the CTW were always aware that adults, specifically parents, would also be engaging with *Sesame Street*. While parents were not the intended audience of the programme, the CTW did anticipate that there would be parent viewers who would watch the programme in order to benefit their pre-school children and not for their own pleasure. However, the CTW wanted to encourage co-viewing in order to fulfil its public service education aims, so designed *Sesame Street* to contain elements that would encourage parents to continue engaging with the programme alongside their children. Therefore, much of the humour displayed by *Sesame Street* aimed to simultaneously

[425] Lesser, *Children and Television : Lessons from Sesame Street*. p52

appeal to its primary intended audience, pre-schoolers, and appease its secondary audience, their parents. Heather Hendershot notes that "to attract adult viewers, *Sesame Street* featured stars recognisable primarily to grown-ups." [426] One of the main strategies that *Sesame Street* utilised to achieve this was by including celebrity guests to act in segments during the programme. Each guest star would be involved in a series of the segments through an episode and help teach a basic lesson.



Figure 27 - James Earl Jones Counting to 10 in 1969

The first celebrity guest star to film a segment for *Sesame Street* was James Earl Jones, who appeared on the second episode of the programme in 1969 (Fig 27). This demonstrates that celebrity guests had been envisioned as part of the show's format from the beginning of production and that the CTW had

[426] Heather Hendershot, "Sesame Street: Cognition and Communications Imperialism," in *Kids', Media and Culture*, ed. Marsha Kinder (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 147.

consciously been courting the parent audience from the first season of the programme. Jones was already famous and well-known to an adult audience due to his role as Lt. Zogg in *Doctor Strangelove or: How I learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964), but had no previous experience of working in children's television. Jones' appearance consisted of him sitting alone, staring straight into the camera and reciting the alphabet and counting the numbers one to ten. His celebrity status would be completely unknown to a preschool audience, so the only audience that would benefit specifically from his appearance in the programme would be an adult audience who were familiar with his previous work. In the first season of 131 episodes, 14 celebrities guest starred on the programme in various roles, including variety show host Carol Burnett, blues singer B.B. King and country singer Michael Cooney. The celebrities invited to appear on the programme came from a variety of backgrounds and were known to different adult audiences. *People Magazine* described the practice as "a classic Sesame Street lesson about diversity that goes back to its ground-breaking roots as one of the few shows in the 1970s to feature all races and ethnicities."[427] This demonstrates that in order to reach their diverse pre-school audience *Sesame Street* had to attract parents from a variety of backgrounds and cultures. *Sesame Street* therefore included celebrity guest stars from a variety of media, backgrounds and

[427] Cited in Heather Hendershot, "Sesame Street: Cognition and Communications Imperialism," in *Kids', Media and Culture*, ed. Marsha Kinder (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 147.

cultures who would be recognisable to a wide, varied parent audience in order to maintain the programme's parental audience.

Sesame Street had a strong image of who its intended audience was (disadvantaged pre-school children from a variety of backgrounds and locations primarily within inner cities), how they needed to access this audience and maximise the impact of their public service aims (through their parents), and how they would attract these parents (by including a wide variety of celebrity guest stars). This demonstrates that the CTW and Cooney had carefully designed their programme specifically in order to reach their intended pre-school audience and had carefully considered how they could keep this audience entertained while fulfilling their educational targets, while acknowledging and anticipating that parents would also engage with the programme alongside their children.

The public service aims of the CTW had influenced the style and content of *Sesame Street* in order to ensure it reached and educated its intended pre-school audience. The CTW were not, importantly, the only company that influenced *Sesame Street.* One of the defining features of *Sesame Street* was the use of the Muppets, created by Jim Henson. The CTW had initially only approached Henson to produce short segments with his Muppets, separate from the human cast and the programme's main storylines, in order to add variety to the programme's visual aesthetic. However, the Muppet characters proved to be extremely popular with child viewers during the show's initital testing stages and were accordingly upgraded to main cast members and

became a defining feature of the programme. Unlike the CTW, Henson worked within the commercial sector and had no public service aims. The previous work of Henson complicates the intended pre-school audience of *Sesame Street,* as Henson's Muppet creations had established their own adult audience prior to the development of *Sesame Street*. It is important to contextualise *Sesame Street* within Henson's work and investigate how Henson's position as a commercial content creator confuses *Sesame Street's* position and reception because adult viewers had been a part of the intended audience of Henson's prior work. I will investigate the Muppet characters prior to the release of *Sesame Street* in order to examine the existing audience for Henson and the Muppets, which influenced *Sesame Street's* accidental audience.

Prior to his work on *Sesame Street,* Henson had created and used his Muppets in a number of contexts. The first was a short sketch show, entitled *Sam and Friends* (1955-61), which was broadcast on WRC-TV, an NBC affiliate in Washington, D.C. Originally Henson had been performing spots in other programmes, but soon secured his own primetime filler segment starting the 9th of May 1955[428]. It consisted of Henson's Muppets lip-synching to songs or audio in a humorous manner (Fig 28). *Sam and Friends* was usually broadcast as a lead-in for the news, the audience of which primarily comprised of adult viewers or a family audience. In public discourse family entertainment has become conflated with children's entertainment, but this is an

[428] Calbreath-Frasieur, "Muppet Madness: Coherence, Contingency and Chaos in the Media Franchise", 8.

oversimplification. Janet Wasko writes that "targeting families means attempting to appeal to different age groups, not just children."[429] The first television exposure the Muppets received was not targeted at a dedicated child audience; instead the first intended audience of the Muppet characters was an adult audience.



Figure 28 - Jim Henson with the main cast of *Sam and Friends*

Alongside *Sam and Friends,* and continuing after the programme had ended, Henson and his newly created company Muppets, Inc. were involved in creating a vast number of advertisements for both local and national companies. In 1957 Henson was approached to create advertisements for Wilkins Coffee, a coffee company based in Washington D.C., and between 1957 and 1961, 179 adverts were made by Henson and Muppet, Inc. The series was

[429] Janet Wasko, *Understanding Disney : The Manufacture of Fantasy* (Cambridge: Polity; Blackwell, 2001), 185.

hugely successful, and featured two Muppets, the cheerful Wilkins, who liked Wilkins Coffee, and the grumpy Wontkins, who hated it.



Figure 29 - Wontkins about the be shot for disliking Wilkins Coffee

The adverts, which were only ten seconds long, were based around the gag that Wilkins would harm Wontkins – shooting him (Fig 29), blowing him up, stabbing him with a knife, and smashing him with a club, among many other violent acts.[430] The product being sold, coffee, was intended for adult consumers. Following the success of the Wilkins Coffee commercials in the Washington, D.C. market, Jim Henson sold the concept to coffee companies in other local markets around the US. The same adverts were re-shot with the name of the coffee company being changed. Companies from Louisiana, Alabama, Boston, New York and Minnesota all franchised Wilkins and

[430] "Wilkins Coffee," Muppet Wiki, http://muppet.wikia.com/wiki/Wilkins_Coffee.
The transcript for the advert the above image is taken from is as follows:
Wilkins: Care for a cup of Wilkins Coffee?
Wontkins: No, I don't like coffee.
(As Wontkins says this, a hand from off screen places a gun next to Wontkins head. As he completes the line, the gun fires, dropping Wontkins out of frame in a puff of smoke)
Wilkins: This has been a public service.

Wontkins, and gave the Muppet characters' nationwide exposure to an adult, coffee-drinking audience.

Other Muppets featured in commercials for a range of other products. Rowlf and Kermit appeared in adverts for Esskay Meats (one of *Sam and Friends* sponsors) from 1959-63, Onky in adverts for On-Cor Frozen Foods in 1962, Rowlf in Canadian Purina Dog Chow from 1962-3, and a range of Muppet characters appeared in a series of adverts for the United States Federal Housing Administration from 1963-9. Due to the variety of different products the Muppet characters were advertising a large portion of their intended audience would be adults, those who had financial standing and independence to control their own purchasing habits. Therefore, some of the Muppet characters, including Kermit the Frog and Rowlf, who would later go on and appear in *Sesame Street,* were becoming familiar to an adult audience through their commercial appearances.

In addition to their advertisements, the Muppets also began to make appearances on television programmes during the 1960s. Rowlf the Dog became a regular performer on the *Jimmy Dean Show* from 1963 to 1966 and acted as Jimmy's sidekick.[431] The *Jimmy Dean Show* was a variety show that aired during primetime on ABC-TV and was aimed at a family audience. In each hour-long episode Rowlf featured for a sketch that lasted about 10 minutes and most comedy sketches ended with Rowlf and Jimmy performing a duet. Rowlf

[431] Daniel Williams, "The Secret Genius of Rowlf the Dog." *What Culture*, 23rd September 2012. http://whatculture.com/film/the-secret-genius-of-rowlf-the-dog.

was a huge hit and received around two thousand fan letters a week during his run on the programme.[432] This led to him emceeing his own CBS summer replacement series in 1967, entitled *Our Place* (1967), which was also a variety show which featured guest stars (including Carol Burnett) and musical acts.[433] Again, the programme was aimed at a family audience and many adults would be familiar with the character of Rowlf and other Muppet characters due to their appearances on these programmes.

Alongside hosting variety shows, the Muppet characters were also frequent



Figure 30 - Rowlf and Jimmy Dean

guests on variety shows during the 1960s and performed sketches on *The Ed Sullivan Show* (1948-71) as 'the Muppets', beginning in 1966. They also appeared on *The Jack Paar Program* (1962-65), *The Hollywood Palace* (1964-70), and *The Tonight Show* (1954-). These appearances were all pre- *Sesame Street*, and were the first exposure the US audience had to Henson, Muppets,

[432] Jimmy Dean, *Thirty Years of Sausage, Fifty Years of Ham: Jimmy Dean's Own Story* (Berkeley: Berkeley Books, 2004).
[433]"Our Place," Muppet Wiki, http://muppet.wikia.com/wiki/Our_Place.

Inc. and the Muppet characters. It is important to note the exposure that characters such as Kermit and Rowlf had before they appeared on *Sesame Street* in order to explore how Henson's initial intended family audience was comprised of adults who would go on to constitute some of *Sesame Street's* accidental adult audience.

The initial audience of *Sesame Street* was, therefore, quite complicated in its make-up. The intended audience of the programme was pre-school children. While, politically, *Sesame Street* aimed to benefit disadvantaged inner-city children in particular, the producers and Cooney knew that to attract this audience they had to appeal to all young children, regardless of their background. However, in order to access its pre-school audience, *Sesame Street* had to attract another audience, their parents. The intended audience of the programme was primarily pre-school children and secondarily these children's parents. To further complicate this, *Sesame Street* used characters and Muppets who had already developed their own intended audience through other media exposures, namely a family audience that included adults. Aaron Calbreath–Frasieur articulates that "prior to *Sesame,* Muppets, Inc. texts had been commercially and largely aimed at adults. *Sesame* brought the Muppets into educational and children's media. This change in brand positioning would become an ongoing tension within the brand identity."[434] So, while *Sesame Street* was designed to appeal to pre-school children and appease their parents, the Muppet characters had a history of appealing to

[434] Calbreath-Frasieur, "Muppet Madness: Coherence, Contingency and Chaos in the Media Franchise", 102.

family and adult audiences. This would affect the initial actual audience of *Sesame Street,* which was decidedly heterogeneous and comprised of pre-school children, their parents, and other non-parent adults.[435]

While the CTW had a public service mind-set and specific educational aims for *Sesame Street,* Henson's unanticipated level of input complicated this, as Henson emerged out of a commercial environment. *Sesame Street's* broadcast came out of the twin contexts of the public service orientated CTW and the commercially minded Jim Henson, a combination which complicated its initial audience and challenged the clearly defined intended audience of pre-school children.

This complicated initial audience allowed *Sesame Street* to begin to move beyond the confines of children's television into wider popular culture and, while it is not the aim of this chapter to present a comprehensive historical archaeology of the adult audience of *Sesame Street,* key historical moments can be examined that demonstrate how the programme was being received by adult viewers and provide evidence for the existence of the programme's accidental audience. I argue that the programme's widening status within popular cultural is a result of its appeal to an audience beyond its intended pre-school audience and resonance with an adult audience.

[435] In this instance I use non-parent to refer to adults who do not have children that are part of the intended audience of *Sesame Street.* These adults may still be parents, but are not included in the co-viewing strategy of the programme.

In 1970, during the first year of the programme'sbroadcast *Sesame Street* won three Emmy awards in Children's Programming categories. However, there was a fourth award that the programme was nominated for, but did not win: The Outstanding New Series award. Other programmes nominated included *The Bill Cosby Show, The Forsyte Saga, Marcus Welby M.D.,* and eventual winner *Room 222.* This is interesting because it is not an award for children's programming; instead it is a category primarily for adult programming. For example, *The Forsyte Saga* is a Victorian and Edwardian period piece about a middle-upper class family. *Room 222* is about an African-American teacher trying to teach tolerance in a high school and *Marcus Welby, M.D.* is a medical drama. These were not programmes aimed at a child audience; instead their intended audiences were adult, or family, viewers. Gillian Roberts argues that

> Prizes do particular kinds of work: they promote and perpetuate competing forms of valuing…and, in the context of national cultural celebration, they contribute to the defining parameters of the nation and its culture.[436]

The inclusion of *Sesame Street* in this category, therefore, implies that the programme was perceived as a 'quality' programme, not just for children, but for the television audience as a whole. By releasing *Sesame Street* out of categories specifically for children's programming it demonstrated that the programme had made an impact on the television industry outside of its role

[436] Gillian Roberts, *Prizing Literature: The Celebration and Circulation of National Culture* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), 17.

as an educational children's programme. The adult viewers of *Sesame Street* had created a wide audience base that meant the programme could plausibly be viewed as a programme for adults, not just the programme's intended pre-school audience. The nomination valued *Sesame Street* as a quality programme and perpetuated the view that *Sesame Street* deserved to be watched, and celebrated, by a broad audience, not just a child audience.

The 1970s Emmy Awards also contained another event that demonstrated that *Sesame Street* had impacted not just children's television but television as a whole; the character of Big Bird presented an award during the ceremony to musician Burt Bacharach.[437] The audience for the Emmy's (both those at the ceremony itself and the viewers watching it on television) was and remains predominantly adult, thus the appearance of the Muppet character suggests that the characters of the programme had become familiar to a wide, adult television audience. The lack of any media coverage or outcry[438] about the appearance also demonstrates Big Bird's position within wider TV culture. This suggests that public knowledge of Big Bird was both widespread and positive. As celebrities are the predominant presenters at award ceremonies, it further suggests that Big Bird was not just recognisable to an adult audience, but had achieved celebrity status. The audience members, and home viewers, would appreciate his presence and find his appearance at the Emmy awards is

[437] "Emmy Awards Ceremony", *The Muppets Wiki,* http://muppet.wikia.com/wiki/Emmy_Awards_Ceremony

[438] While it is impossible to claim Big Bird's attendance at the Emmy's drew no media attention, as it is impossible to access every newspaper article from 1970, there is no apparent reaction to his attendance, and no mention of his appearance is made in mainstream newspapers, for which access to their historical documents is possible.

humorous, and the only way the character would have gained this level of status is if a large accidental adult audience was engaging with *Sesame Street.*

It was not only Big Bird who had begun to cultivate a celebrity persona. In the first two years after the programme's broadcast other *Sesame Street* characters were also appearing on a variety of different television programmes. While Henson had made appearances with non-*Sesame Street* Muppets prior to *Sesame Street,* after the programme aired the number of appearances dramatically increased. This demonstrates that the programme had helped disseminate the Muppets to a wider audience and suggests that it was Henson who spearheaded the celebrity of the Muppet characters, rather than Cooney and the CTW. While the adult audience of the Muppets was unexpected to Cooney and the CTW, Henson had previous experience of having an adult audience and utilised his knowledge to cultivate this audience for his Muppet characters.

After the broadcast of *Sesame Street*, Kermit the frog and Cookie Monster appeared on *Pure Goldie,* a TV special that aired on February 15, 1971. It was a variety show where host Goldie Hawn performed in a number of sketches alongside a variety of guests. Harry Harris, the TV columnist for *The Philadelphia Inquirer* wrote, "Jim Henson's '*Sesame Street*' Muppets…as represented by Kermit and the Cookie Monster, seem overdue for such prime-time TV take-over. The Goldie-Kermit collaboration was far and away the

program's highlight,"[439] and *Variety* declared, "[Hawn's] best routine was one with Muppets, and her experience with Kermit the frog was funny, indeed."[440] The reviews for the *Sesame Street* sections were unanimously positive and Harris' comments suggest that television viewers were not only happy to watch the characters appear on other programmes, but also that it was expected of them because they were so famous. The characters were simply introduced on the programmes as Kermit the Frog and 'the monster' (who had not been linked with a desire for cookies yet), and it was not stated that they were characters from *Sesame Street*. While Kermit had guest-starred on variety shows prior to *Sesame Street,* and may be recognisable to an adult audience through those appearances, the Cookie Monster was specifically designed for *Sesame Street* and had not appeared in any previous Muppet productions. This demonstrates that the producers of *Pure Goldie* expected their audience to already be familiar with the character purely from his role on *Sesame Street*.

These guest appearances demonstrate both the existence of the accidental adult audience and the CTW's desire to cultivate said audience. By allowing their characters to appear on variety and talk shows, it demonstrates that the CTW was aware of non-parent adults watching and engaging with *Sesame Street,* and that they had quickly decided to cultivate this accidental audience through said appearances. At the same time, Harris's review of *Pure Goldie* states that the Muppets were over-due for a primetime takeover. As Harris is

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[439]Anon, "'in L.A. Vtr Goldie Hawn Special, Did "Green" - Some Talk.'," *Jim Henson's Red Book*, 16th November 2012/ https://www.henson.com/jimsredbook/2012/11/1116-201970/.
[440]Ibid.

not affiliated with the CTW, this suggests that the Muppet characters had gained substantial celebrity status, and it was expected that they act as celebrities rather than characters. This demonstrates that a large accidental adult audience had been engaging with both *Sesame Street* and its characters, raising the programme out of the 'ghetto' of children's programming and into wider television culture.


close up

Connie Stevens and the Muppets

TOM JONES (C)
6:30 5 7 8 10

MUSIC FROM LONDON

Special: Tom's guests in London are Connie Stevens, the Muppets, singer Dave Edmunds and the Band of the Welsh Guards.

Big Jim Sullivan, Norman Maen dancers, Mike Sammes singers, Johnnie Spence orchestra. (60 min.)

Highlights

"Bridge Over Troubled Water," "Remembering," rock and roll medley: "Good Old Rock 'n Roll," "Johnny B. Goode," "Boney Maroney," "Long Tall Sally" .....Tom
"Penny Candy" .....Connie
"Mah-Na-Mah-Na" .....Muppets
"I'm Coming Home" .....Dave
"Delilah" .....Welsh Guards
"Close to You" .....Connie, Muppets
"Scarborough Fair" ..Tom, Welsh Guards
"I Know a Place," "Keep the Customer Satisfied" .....Tom, Connie, Muppets

Figure 31 - TV Guide Advert featuring Connie Stevens and the Muppets

In July of the same year Kermit appeared on another variety show special and, alongside a selection of other Muppets, performed on *This is Tom Jones* (1969-71). Similarly, to *Pure Goldie,* the characters interacted with Tom Jones in a variety of sketches, this time often involving singing. A *TV Guide* advert for the programme credited the characters simply as 'The Muppets', and they were

included in the promotional photo for the programme. This was before *The Muppet Show* had been developed, so it referred to the medium of the characters, rather than the programme title. This demonstrates that not only would the characters be recognisable to the audience, and not need a lengthy introduction or a reminder of which programme the characters were from, but also that they might be able to utilise their 'star attraction' and increase the audience of the programme more than the other celebrity guests Dave Edmunds and Big Jim Sullivan. This demonstrates that not only were the *Sesame Street* characters famous enough to be invited on variety programmes as celebrity guests, but also that they were some of the more famous celebrities and were used as selling-points for a programme. The Muppets had amassed a wider adult audience that followed them beyond the confines of *Sesame Street* and into wider television culture and Henson utilised this to cultivate this adult audience of his Muppets.

Sesame Street also gained academic attention soon after it was first broadcast. Raymond Williams discussed the programme in a 1971 column published in *The Listener.*[441] While the focus of Williams' article is the perception of the programme by British audiences, he does discuss his own affinity for the programme and states that "I found myself joining in. The magic glasses to identify noises were delightful."[442] He found the programme enjoyable in its own right and appreciated it not only because his granddaughter enjoyed it,

[441] Alan O'Connor, *Raymond Williams*, (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006), 160.
[442] Ibid

but because he also enjoyed it. This demonstrates that *Sesame Street* was already beginning to have a discursive impact on the delineation of what was children's television and what was family television.

Sesame Street had been created by the CTW to fulfil a specific public service aim, to educate disadvantaged pre-school children. In order to ensure the programme was visually stimulating and interesting enough to attract this pre-school audience the CTW had involved Jim Henson and his Muppet creations acted as audience surrogates on the programme. Nonetheless, due to Henson's previous work being aimed at an intended adult audience, the parent audience the CTW anticipated grew beyond their expectations and became the accidental adult audience of *Sesame Street.* This led to *Sesame Street* breaking out of the children's television classification and making a greater impact on wider popular culture, as demonstrated by the Emmy nominations the programme received in 1970 and the growing celebrity status of the *Sesame Street* Muppet characters.

Managing the Accidental Adult Audience of *Sesame Street*

This section will explore how the CTW managed the accidental adult audience of *Sesame Street* beyond the initial broadcast years that I have so far addressed. It will examine how they started to incorporate the accidental audience into the intended audience of the programme, thereby making the accidental adult audience of *Sesame Street* an absorbed audience. However it

will also navigate how the creation of Henson's *The Muppet Show* (1976-81)[443] temporarily shifted the accidental adult audience away from *Sesame Street* due to *TMS* having an intended adult audience and a similar aesthetic to *Sesame Street. TMS* caused a distinction to be made between *Sesame Street,* which was seen as the Muppet production for children, and *TMS* which was the Muppet production for adults. After the cancellation of *TMS, Sesame Street* once again began to encourage the adult audience that it regained and explicitly courted them.

As previously discussed, *Sesame Street* emerged out of the twin contexts of the CTW and Henson. This commingling of the CTW and Henson soon caused problems for the programme and tensions between public service and commercial aims arose. This tension has been a recurring issue that *Sesame Street* has had to deal with, even from the very beginning of the programme's broadcast. In 1970 a commercial product created by Henson prior to his involvement with *Sesame Street* was released. The product was an hour long special entitled *Hey Cinderella!* (1969), which was sponsored by R. J. Reynolds Tobacco Company, and featured Kermit the frog as a main character as well as providing commercial lead-ins.[444] The *New York Times* critic Jack Gould implied that Kermit's involvement in the production showed that the CTW were willing to sell-out.[445] Henson wrote a rebuttal to the newspaper defending the CTW,

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[443] From this point on *The Muppet Show* will be referred to as *TMS.* This is to avoid confusing the term Muppet, which I am using to describe Henson's aesthetic and creations, with the programme.

[444] "Hey Cinderella!," Muppet Wiki, http://muppet.wikia.com/wiki/Hey_Cinderella!

[445] Jack Gould, "Sesame Street May Open the Right Doors." *New York Times*, November 23rd 1969., 39.

acknowledging his commercial history but stating that "since the advent of *Sesame Street*… I have become a great deal more selective, and have turned down many lucrative offers that seemed to be trying to capitalise on *Sesame Street.*"[446] The matter was taken seriously, however, by the CTW and Kermit was removed from *Sesame Street's* second season.[447] *Time* magazine reported that:

> Kermit the Frog is being canned for commercialism. When Sesame Street was just a glint in Joan Cooney's eye, Kermit taped a special in Canada. When it was given a network airing, the frog was compromised… Like Jim Thorpe, Kermit played for money, and must now relinquish his amateurs standing. He is being phased out of the show.[448]

The CTW and Henson had quickly been confronted with issues that arose out of their differing ideological stand points. The *Sesame Street* Muppets, due to their status as public service role models for young children, were held to a higher standard by the media. This meant that the CTW and Henson had to be very careful where they allowed the *Sesame Street* Muppets to appear, so that they could ensure that they could not be accused of 'selling out' or commercialising childhood. It is important to note that the product Kermit was selling was cigarettes, a product aimed at adults. The media had paid attention

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[446] Davis, *Street Gang: The Complete History of Sesame Street*.

[447] Although he later returned in a greatly reduced role.

[448] Stefan Kanfer, "Sesame Street: TV's Gift to Children." *TIME Magazine*, 23rd November 1970.

to this particular advertisement because since the advent of *Sesame Street* Kermit had been situated within the sphere of children's television and his appearance in an advert for cigarettes removed him from the child-friendly environment of public service and placed him in Henson's adult orientated commercial sphere, which was deemed unacceptable. This reinforces a recurring theme through *Sesame Street's* history: that the CTW is primarily concerned with pre-schoolers and public service aims, while Henson is a commercial figure who capitalises on whichever audience is engaging with his creations. The CTW had learnt that *Sesame Street* Muppet characters had to be carefully managed and presented in order for them to avoid criticism. This meant that all public appearances of the Muppet characters had to be suitable for children to watch, even if they were aimed at the accidental adult audience.

One of the first instances that the CTW actively acknowledged and utilised their accidental adult audience was during an appearance on *The Dick Cavett Show* (1969 – 1975). On November 25th 1971, a selection of performers and Muppets from *Sesame Street* (including Kermit the Frog, Lothar, Cookie Monster, Big Bird and Thog) appeared on the late night talk show. The aim of the appearance was to promote both the educationally focussed *The Muppet Alphabet Album* (the first album created that was hosted solely by the *Sesame Street* Muppet characters without assistance from the human cast and contained a song for each letter of the alphabet), and the upcoming *The Frog Prince* (a hour long special, part of the *Tales from Muppetland* series, that told the story of the Frog

Prince and was narrated by Kermit).[449] As a late night talk show, the audience of *The Dick Cavett Show* would be comprised entirely of adult viewers. The appearance acted as advertising and promoting merchandise to an adult audience without pre-school aged children. The aim of the appearance was to capitalise on the adult audience of *Sesame Street* by promoting content on a programme that they were the intended audience for. Rather than just advertise the album and special to their child audience, they included their adult viewers in their marketing strategy, and simultaneously their audience. While Henson may have driven the appearance, this is an event that clearly demonstrates that the CTW was also interested in capitalising on their accidental adult audience, and the non-parent adult audience of *Sesame Street* was no longer accidental, but had instead begun to be absorbed into the intended audience for the programme. Nevertheless, Henson soon started trying to create more adult orientated content with his Muppets, which impacted the accidental adult audience of *Sesame Street.* While *Sesame Street* had brought Henson fame and critical acclaim, he felt stifled by the programme and the limitations placed the storylines to ensure it remained suitable for its pre-school audience and, as demonstrated by Kermit's removal from *Sesame Street,* the limitations the programme's public service aims placed on how he could use his own Muppet creations. Henson had, historically, created more adult orientated programmes and sketches and he wanted to return to

[449] "The Dick Cavett Show," Muppet Wiki, http://muppet.wikia.com/wiki/The_Dick_Cavett_Show.

producing adult content that he had more control over.[450] This led to Henson partnering with *Saturday Night Live* (*SNL*) to produce a series of sketches entitled *The Land of Gorch* (1975-76), which were included in the first season of *SNL.*[451] *The Gorch* sketches dealt with adult subject matter, such as alcohol and drug abuse, and adultery.[452] In all, *The Gorch* marked a dramatic departure from *Sesame Street* and its child orientated storylines. Disappointingly, the sketches were not that popular and *The Gorch* sketches were dropped after the first season. Terence Bowman wrote that:

> Audiences didn't really know what to make of the sketches either. Here are Muppets in a kind of childlike fantasy setting, they have the same voices as many of the *Sesame Street* Muppets, yet they're making the archetypal 70s *SNL* "I am so stoned" kinda jokes. They were too confused to laugh most of the time.[453]

This suggests that the adult audience of *SNL* were familiar with the *Sesame Street* format and visual style and that this familiarity made them uncomfortable with the *Land of Gorch's* dramatic departure from the humorous material they expected from the characters. This adult audience had expectations about what the Muppet characters should act like due to their experiences of watching *Sesame Street.* This suggests that *Sesame Street* was

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[450] Terence Bowman, "The Muppets: Kids' Stuff or Subversive Adult Comedy?," *Den of Geek*, 7th February 2012. http://www.denofgeek.com/movies/18700/the-muppets-kids'-stuff-or-subversive-adult-comedy.

[451] From October 1975 to April 1976

[452] "The Land of Gorch," Muppet Wiki, http://muppet.wikia.com/wiki/The_Land_of_Gorch.

[453] Bowman, "The Muppets: Kids' Stuff or Subversive Adult Comedy?."

watched by an adult audience that would also watch *SNL,* and that this audience found it hard to reconcile their knowledge of the *Sesame Street* Muppets with explicitly adult content.



Figure 32 - *The Land of Gorch* characters

After the cancellation of *The Land of Gorch* sketches, Henson shifted focus towards creating a Muppet programme that he would have more creative control over, entitled *The Muppet Show* (*TMS,* 1976-81). The format of the programme consisted of a cast of Muppet characters performing sketches and songs, with a celebrity guest each week. Brian Henson, Jim Henson's son, has described *TMS* as adult entertainment, stating that "The years with the Muppets, it was really all targeted to adults. It was in a time when everything had to be safe for the whole family. But he was targeting adults."[454] The intended audience of *TMS* was significantly different from the original intended audience of *Sesame Street.* This is further reinforced by the fact that one of *TMS's* pilots was entitled *The Muppet Show: Sex and Violence* (1975), with the

[454] Ibid.

title demonstrating that the programme, much like the *Land of Gorch* sketches, was skewed towards an adult audience. The guest stars that appeared on *TMS* reflected this adult focus, with celebrities such as rock star Alice Cooper and sex symbol Raquel Welch appearing.[455] However, the programme was never as explicitly adult or risqué as the *Land of Gorch* sketches due to the fact it was broadcast as a lead-in to primetime channels and was exposed to a family audience. Jerry Juhl, the head writer for *Fraggle Rock* and *TMS,* has stated, when discussing the intergenerational appeal Henson's main productions have had, that:

> There has never really been a time when we have done a show that is aimed specifically and solely at an age group…*The Muppet Show* was a primetime show that was for adults but really at one level reached to children, and parents and children could enjoy it together.[456]

TMS was a programme that was intended for a more adult audience, but still appealed to and attracted children and the family audience as well. The show was critically well received too, and in 1977 it won a Primetime Emmy award and was nominated for two more.

TMS was a programme that contained recognisable and new Muppet characters, shared a similar format to *Sesame Street* and targeted an adult

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[455] Calbreath-Frasieur, "Muppet Madness: Coherence, Contingency and Chaos in the Media Franchise", 69.

[456] Fraggle Rock Complete First Season: Bonus Disk

audience but attracted a family one. So, why did it impact the audience of *Sesame Street*? *TMS* both encouraged and discouraged the accidental adult audience of *Sesame Street* and further complicated the audience of both *Sesame Street* and the Muppet franchise. Firstly, it is important to remember that the CTW was involved in the creation and development of *Sesame Street,* but not *TMS.* This is not, therefore, a case of a single company diversifying or consolidating its audience, but a more complicated relationship. Due to the intertextuality between *Sesame Street* and *TMS,* with the crossover of characters such as Kermit and Big Bird (who made several guest appearances on *TMS*), and shared guest celebrities, the two programmes were textually linked, as well as aesthetically linked. However, they both had different aims and production contexts, while *Sesame Street* was US and broadcast on PBS; *TMS* was commercial and created in the UK[457] and broadcast by CBS in the US. So *TMS* was not an attempt by the CTW to shift adult viewers away from *Sesame Street,* but the programme did have the effect of resituating *Sesame Street* within the realm of children's television. After *TMS* started broadcasting, *Sesame Street* was no longer nominated for Primetime Emmy awards; instead it was only nominated in children's categories, while *TMS* received the Primetime Emmy nominations.[458] While *Sesame Street* retained its child and parent audience, *TMS* gained a huge family audience, including the non-parent adults who had previously been watching *Sesame Street.*

[457] After being unsuccessful in gaining a contract with US networks, Henson made a deal with ATV to produce *TMS* in the UK to broadcast on ATV and syndicate in the US.
[458] "Emmy Awards", *The Muppet Wiki,* http://muppet.wikia.com/wiki/Emmy_Awards

TMS was only broadcast for five seasons and ended in 1981.[459] During the broadcast of *TMS,* it was viewed as the Henson production with intergenerational appeal, and *Sesame Street* was a children's programme. After *TMS* ended, *Sesame Street*, while still classified as a children's programme, began to be nominated for Emmy's in non-children's categories, such as 'Outstanding Video Tape Editing for a Limited Series' or a 'Special' in 1983[460] once again breaking out of the children's television 'ghetto'. *Sesame Street* also began to mimic certain *TMS* sketches and tropes in order to attract the *TMS* audience back to *Sesame Street*[461]*.* Ultimately the programme regained some of the accidental adult audience it had in the pre-*TMS* years and was subsequently classed as one of the most popular television programmes of the 1980s.[462] *Sesame Street* had also gained from the worldwide success of *TMS,* as the intertextuality between the programmes and the increased celebrity of Kermit had increased the cultural awareness and status of *Sesame Street.* So, even if the programme had lost some of its accidental adult audience during *TMS's* run, it had gained cultural value, which it retained after the end of *TMS.* An important event also impacted *Sesame Street* in 1981 that contributed to the CTW's decision to try and cultivate the accidental adult audience of the programme after the cancellation of *TMS.* In 1981 the CTW lost all federal funding and had to begin to adopt more commercial strategies in order to

[459] With the characters continuing to appear in Muppet feature films.

[460] "Emmy Awards", *The Muppet Wiki,* http://muppet.wikia.com/wiki/Emmy_Awards

[461] These features will be explored in more detail in later sections of this chapter.

[462] Josh Jackson, "The 80 Best TV Shows of the 1980s," *Paste Magazine*, 11th November 2014. https://www.pastemagazine.com/blogs/lists/2014/11/the-80-best-tv-shows-of-the-1980s.html.

survive. While *Sesame Street* was still broadcast on PBS, because it no longer received federal funding the CTW did not have to adhere as rigidly to the standards set by the mainstream media and could become more commercial without being accused of 'selling-out'. One strategy that the CTW decided to utilise in order to secure funding was to encourage their accidental adult audience to engage with the programme.

This led to the content of *Sesame Street* also being adjusted in order to entice the CTW's multifaceted adult audience into watching the programme. While the CTW were never explicit in their desire to incorporate their accidental adult audience, they did subtly change certain segments in *Sesame Street* to make them appeal more strongly to an adult audience. The first segment that clearly demonstrates the CTW's desire to cultivate their adult audience is the *Monsterpiece Theatre* series, which was introduced during season 13 in 1981 after the cancellation of *TMS*. The series was a spoof of the PBS *Masterpiece Theatre* (1971-2008), which was a drama anthology series that presented novel adaptations, plays and television dramas. *Masterpiece Theatre* was critically acclaimed and received multiple awards, making it a famous and well known



Figure 33 - Alastair Cookie in Monsterpiece Theatre

programme to the American television viewing public. *Masterpiece Theatre* was presented by Alastair Cooke, so *Monsterpiece Theatre* was presented by Alastair Cookie (Cookie Monster wearing a smoking jacket and ascot). *Monsterpiece Theatre* copied the format of *Masterpiece Theatre* by presenting short sketches based on classic literature, plays or movies.[463] The first segment released was *Me, Claudius,* a parody of *I, Claudius* where four Muppets fight over who is Claudius (each of them declaring "Me Claudius!"). The sketch teaches children about the word 'me' and there is some humour in the Muppet characters arguing, but most of the humour is dependent on being familiar with the source material, especially the opening title screen which is a direct reference to the 1976 twelve-part series, with which adults would be familiar with but would be unfamiliar to pre-school children. The direct parodying the segment performed demonstrates that the intended audience for the sketch was adult viewers who had watched the original source material, which did include the parent audience but also appealed to non-parent adults and fans of the *I, Claudius* series.



Figure 34 - Me, Claudius title screen

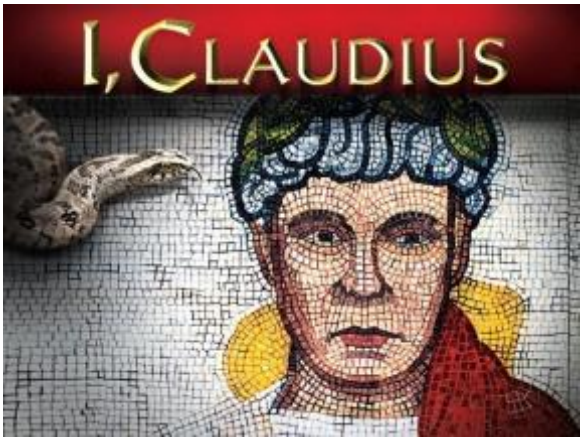


Figure 35 - I, Claudius title screen

[463]"Monsterpiece Theatre", *The Muppet Wiki,* http://muppet.wikia.com/wiki/Monsterpiece_Theater

Other *Monsterpiece Theatre* segments included *Waiting for Elmo*, based on the surrealist play *Waiting for Godot.* The punchline of the segment focuses on the scenery of the play becoming confused and storming off while asking "Why couldn't they do Oklahoma? I *understand* Oklahoma!", while the Muppet characters run after him because they have to wait for Elmo by the tree. While the scene contains enough humorous elements for pre-school children, like *Me, Claudius,* most of the humour is dependent on being familiar with the play, which only parts of *Sesame Street*'s adult audience would be. *Monsterpiece Theatre* also parodied popular television programmes, such as *Twin Peaks,* with their segment *Twin Beaks,* and the Alfred Hitchcock classic *The 39 Steps.* By parodying popular adult culture *Sesame Street* was appealing to a parent and a non-parent adult audience, but not a pre-school audience. The shift in *Sesame Street* from producing children's content that would appeal to adults, to creating some adult content that would appeal to children, demonstrates that the CTW and *Sesame Street* were actively trying to encourage and cultivate adults to watch the programme and copied popular *TMS* strategies to entice fans of the newly cancelled *TMS* to engage with *Sesame Street*.

Monsterpiece Theatre segments appeared from 1981 until 2007. The reason for *Monsterpiece Theatre's* discontinuation demonstrates continuing tension between *Sesame Street's* public service and commercial aims and the balancing act that the CTW had to perform between attracting an adult audience and remaining suitable for their pre-school audience. Just as with Alastair Cooke in *Masterpiece Theatre,* the Cookie Monster held a pipe during the sketches. As

the seasons progressed it became less acceptable for the Cookie Monster to be seen with smoking paraphernalia, so the pipe was dropped in the late 1980s. and the opening sequence changed so it no longer parodied *Masterpiece Theatre* in 1995. While the segments continued to parody classic literature, film and television, they no longer directly parodied *Masterpiece Theatre,* as the programme was no longer deemed suitable and appropriate for its pre-school audience. The segments spawned a similar series in 2006 entitles *Dinner Theatre,* which also spoofed classic plays and popular culture but focussed on teaching lessons about food and healthy eating. For example, the first episode was entitled *Omelet: Prince of Dinner,* and was a spoof of Shakespeare's *Hamlet.* However, this series of segments was less popular and only continued for one season.



Figure 36 - Screen shots from *Crumbly Pictures Presents,* clockwise from top left: *When Cookie Met Sally, The Life of Whoopi Pie, Lord of the Crumbs, Les Mousserables*

The current series of segments that actively court an adult audience is entitled *Cookie's Crumby Pictures* and spoofs contemporary blockbuster films and television programmes, with Cookie Monster once again taking the starring role. Starting in 2013, this series contains segments entitled *When Cookie Met Sally* (based on *When Harry Met Sally), Les Mousserables (Les Miserables), Lord of the Crumbs (Lord of the Rings)* and *The Life of Whoopi Pie* (*The Life of Pi).* While some of these films may be known to pre-school audiences, they are not intended to be viewed by children that young, so their inclusion in *Sesame Street* demonstrates that the programme was trying to appeal to adult audiences by using references they would be familiar with. This is reinforced through other sketches included in the programme, which parody explicitly adult programmes such as *Homelamb (Homeland), Birdwalk Empire (Boardwalk Empire), Sons of Poetry (Sons of Anarchy),* and the hugely successful viral hit *House of Bricks* (*House of Cards).* [464] These are all programmes which are highly unsuitable for child audiences, and would be completely unknown to *Sesame Street's* child audience. These parodies are specifically designed for a diverse range of adult viewers, which included parents and non-parents alike.

The inclusion of these series of segments demonstrates that *Sesame Street* was subtly trying to produce content that would appeal to adult viewers. While the

[464] "Sesame Street Has Made a Must-Watch House of Cards Spoof." *Vox*, 24th February 2015. http://www.vox.com/2015/2/24/8100135/sesame-street-house-of-cards."; Jon Blistein, "Watch 'Sesame Street' Parody 'House of Cards'," *Rolling Stone*, 23rd February 2015. http://www.rollingstone.com/tv/videos/frank-underwolf-huffs-and-puffs-in-sesame-street-house-of-cards-parody-20150224.

programme had always been concerned with promoting co-viewing between their parent and child audience, as the programme developed there was a greater emphasis placed on producing content that would primarily appeal to adults while still being suitable for children, rather than the original strategy of producing content that would appeal to children and their parents simultaneously. This is more discreet than Hasbro explicitly including Derpy Hooves in *MLP:FIM* to cultivate the Brony audience, but is still important because it demonstrates that the CTW were trying to incorporate non-parent adults into the intended audience of the programme without explicitly stating it.

Sesame Street had a complex relationship with its accidental adult audience. While initially the programme had wanted to encourage co-viewing with the parents of its intended pre-school audience, it had expanded beyond that pre-school model and attracted a significant accidental adult audience by the late 1980s. Driven by Henson, the CTW had capitalised upon this audience, by utilising the celebrity of the characters to market merchandise on late night talk shows and variety shows. The development of *TMS* complicated this relationship by replacing *Sesame Street* as the primary Henson text and, in the eyes of the wider television audience, relegating *Sesame Street* back into the realms of children's television. The popularity and celebrity of *TMS* and its characters simultaneously overshadowed *Sesame Street* and bolstered its cultural standing. After the cancellation of *TMS, Sesame Street* was once again able to expand out of the confines of children's television, reclaim their

accidental audience, and absorb it into the marketing and merchandising strategies of the CTW, cementing that the accidental adult audience of *Sesame Street* had become an 'absorbed audience', an audience that was previously accidental but was then actively encouraged and cultivated by the television industry after they decided to incorporate it into the intended audience of the programme if formed around.

Capitalising on the Accidental Adult Audience

This section will explore how *Sesame Street* attempted to capitalise on their absorbed adult audience from the early 1990s. It will explore how the CTW benefitted both commercially from the absorbed adult audience through the various types of merchandise released for the programme that appeal to an adult audience and how the programme has also benefitted politically. Due to the long running nature of *Sesame Street* this section will also engage with how changing media technologies have facilitated new modes of consumption for the absorbed adult audience and allowed the CTW to segment their content in order to target specific content to the absorbed audience. It will not offer a comprehensive history of how *Sesame Street* changed and adjusted its marketing and format, but will instead pick out key moments from the programme's history and explore the strategies utilised by the CTW to capitalise on their absorbed adult audience since the cancellation of *TMS*.

As mentioned previously, the CTW lost all federal funding in 1981 and had to turn to commercial strategies in order to continue funding its production. In 1984 the Federal Control Commission (FCC) deregulated commercial restrictions on children's television, including *Sesame Street,* and by 1987 two thirds of the programme's income was from commercial products such as magazines, books and product licensing. The remaining third was from the programme's broadcasts on PBS.[465] This section will look at how the CTW capitalised commercially from their absorbed adult audience and how adults begun to play a much more important role in the programme's marketing and merchandising strategies.

It is also important to note that due to its success, *Sesame Street* had become a lucrative franchise and had moved beyond its initial intended audience of disadvantaged U.S. pre-schoolers in a number of different ways. Utilising Derek Johnson's definition that a franchise is "at the most basic, economic level, a franchise is a… business arrangement where one party extends to another party the right to use some kind of idea or intellectual property in a new market,"[466] it is possible to see the *Sesame Street* name being 'licensed out', as it were. Beginning in the early 1970s a number of co-productions were created, the first being Brazil's *Vivo Sesamo,* which took the *Sesame Street* format but tailored it to suit the educational and social needs of the country in which they

[465] Hellman, "Sesame Street Smart: How Big Bird and Co. Do It," 50-51.

[466] Cited in Henry Jenkins, "Rethinking the "Value" of Entertainment Franchises: An Interview with Derek Johnson", *Henry Jenkins.Org,* January 2014. http://henryjenkins.org/2014/01/rethinking-the-value-of-entertainment-franchises-an-interview-with-derek-johnson-part-one.html

were produced. By 2012 over 31 countries had produced their own version of *Sesame Street,* with 21 more re-dubbing the original programme into a new language.[467] *Sesame Street* did not just spread out to international television; Kristin Thompson argues that franchises "are a deliberate economic strategy aimed at maximising the monetary worth of a studio's intellectual property,"[468] which *Sesame Street* also successfully did by branching out into toys (with the Tickle Me Elmo toy, which inspired Elmo-mania and a shopping frenzy in 1996[469]), merchandise, films and magazines. The fact that *Sesame Street* had developed into a popular global franchise by the mid-1990s, and the increasing financial reliance the CTW had on the programme's licensing deals, demonstrates that the CTW was becoming more reliant on *Sesame Street's* commercial status, and was therefore willing to court any available audiences in order to capitalise on them financially, including the programme's adult audience.

An important faction of *Sesame Street's* contemporary adult audience is the programme's 'aged-up' audience. This audience is formed of the original pre-school audiences of the programme who have grown up into adults themselves over the last 45 years. This is an important new audience, as the 'aged-up' audience still have an affection and nostalgic fondness for the programme and continue to engage with it as adults. The role of nostalgia in *Sesame Street*

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[467] "International Sesame Street", *The Muppet Wiki,* http://muppet.wikia.com/wiki/International_Sesame_Street

[468] Kristin Thompson, *The Frodo Franchise: The Lord of the Rings and Modern Hollywood* (California: University of California Press, 2007), 331.

[469] Anon. "Tickle Me Elmo", *The Muppet Wiki,* http://muppet.wikia.com/wiki/Tickle_Me_Elmo

marketing and merchandise has taken an increasingly prominent role as the CTW has recognised this potential adult audience and decided to utilise and cultivate them. The 'aged-up' audience now constitutes the majority of *Sesame Street's* adult audience, both parent and non-parent, as more than 77 million American adults watched the programme as a child.[470] As *Sesame Street* has continued to air, this audience has increased as each new generation of pre-schoolers have grown up along with the programme. This means the 'aged-up' audience are not only attracted to the series due to its guest stars and popular culture parodies, but due to feelings of nostalgia and the emotional connections they formed with the characters and programme when they were children. [471] While *Sesame Street* never intended to have an 'aged-up' audience, as the producers and Cooney could not predict the programme would still be broadcast 45 years later, the CTW (who renamed themselves the Sesame Street Workshop in 2000[472]) has taken this accidental audience and absorbed them into the intended adult audience of the programme. The CTW has targeted the 'aged-up' audience's feelings of nostalgia into their merchandising and marketing of *Sesame Street* in order to cultivate and profit from this 'aged-up' audience.

The most explicit way the CTW has capitalised on the 'aged-up' audience is through merchandise. In 2006 the CTW released the first five seasons of

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[470] Erika Christakis, "Elmo Scandal: Adults Read Too Much Into "Sesame Street"." *Time*, 27th November 2012. http://ideas.time.com/2012/11/27/viewpoint-adults-read-too-much-into-sesame-street/.

[471] Ibid

[472] Interestingly, this renaming capitalises on the company's biggest brand, but also removes the word 'children' from their name.

Sesame Street on DVD in a box set entitled *Sesame Street: Old School Volume 1.* Importantly the box set came with a disclaimer stating that "These early Sesame Street episodes are intended for grown-ups, and may not suit the needs of today's preschool child."[473] While this raises multiple questions about why the programme would no longer be suitable for preschool children, including how children's television has developed and which cultural and educational lessons have changed, this thesis is interested in the section of the quote that describes the box set as "intended for grown-ups". This marketing demonstrates that the CTW believed there would be an adult audience for the first seasons of *Sesame Street* and that this audience would want to watch the programme themselves, rather than share the experience with pre-school children. The format of the episodes on the DVD reinforces this, as they were also edited so that segments only played in the episodes they originally appeared in and were not repeated across multiple episodes. This is also an example of how the new media format of the DVD facilitated this specific targeting and the DVD menu allowed adult viewers to choose their favourite sketches and segments while avoiding others. This demonstrates that the episodes were intended to be used as entertainment, rather than educationally. The only reason for the DVD to be released is to capitalise on the nostalgic 'aged-up' audience, as it would not appeal to pre-school children or their parents. By 2006 the 'aged-up' audience had become a profitable and

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[473] Hadley Freeman, "Sesame Street: Not Suitable for Children." *The Guardian*, 26th November 2007. http://www.theguardian.com/culture/tvandradioblog/2007/nov/26/sesamestreetnotsuitablefor.

important audience for the CTW and *Sesame Street,* as they allowed the back-catalogue of *Sesame Street* episodes to be released. The 'aged-up' audience was incorporated into the intended audience of the programme and specific merchandise was released that was designed to appeal specifically to them. This makes financial sense for the CTW. If they deemed the original seasons of *Sesame Street* to be unsuitable for the pre-school audience, and by extension the co-viewing parent audience who watched with their kids, they needed an audience that did not engage with this pre-school audience. A non-parent, nostalgic 'aged-up' audience would be able to consume this merchandise, allowing *Sesame Street* to monetise its previous seasons without heavy editing or reinvestment to make them child appropriate.

The *Sesame Street* characters have also continued to act as guests on a variety of late-night talk shows and variety shows that had a primarily adult audience. To celebrate the 45th anniversary of the programme, characters such as Big Bird, Elmo, Oscar the Grouch, Abby Cadabby and Murray appeared on the popular programme *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon.* While on the programme each Muppet participated in the programme's *Late Night Hashtags* segment, where the host, Jimmy Fallon*,* normally comes up with a hashtag and then reads the funniest responses from Twitter. The hashtag for the *Sesame Street* characters' appearance was #WhenIWasAKid, and one at a time each Muppet appeared, joked with Fallon, and then read the tweet. Reviews of the programme were positive, with many reviewers saying that "there's something amusing and nostalgic about watching our favourite childhood characters spar

with Jimmy Fallon onscreen."[474] *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon* airs at 11.30pm and often contains swearing and Fallon drinking alcohol with the guests. The intended audience is decidedly adult, and the *Sesame Street*



Figure 37 - Big Bird reading a tweet, and the *Sesame Street* cast performing with Fallon

appearance played strongly to nostalgic themes, with the hashtag specifically referencing the past, so the appearance was intended to appeal to the 'aged-up' audience of *Sesame Street.*

Another one of the ways that the CTW has continued its attempts to cultivate their multifaceted adult audience is through the content and style of the programme itself. However, the programme still has to achieve its educational aims and could not court an adult audience at the expense of their child audience. Instead the programme tries to "capture the 'child' in the viewers."[475] While *Sesame Street* always had celebrity guest stars in order to

[474] Jessica Rawden, "Forget Mean Tweets, Watch Jimmy Fallon and the Sesame Street Cast Read Cute Tweets." *Cinema Blend*, September 9th 2014. http://www.cinemablend.com/television/Forget-Mean-Tweets-Watch-Jimmy-Fallon-Sesame-Street-Cast-Read-Cute-Tweets-67272.html.

[475] Jack Zipes, "Once Upon a Time Beyond Disney: Contemporary Fairy-Tale Films for Children." *Happily Ever After: Fairy Tales, Children, and the Culture Industry* (London: Routledge, 1997) p111.

appeal to their parent audience, as the programme progressed the number of guest stars increased.[476] It can be argued that this is partly down to more celebrities being willing to appear on the programme after the success of *TMS,* with Finch stating that:

> The majority of the guest stars during the first season were either personal friends of the production team, or a client of Jim Henson's agent, Bernie Brillstein. By the second season, the show started to attract more celebrities, and eventually celebrities were asking to appear on the show.[477]

Celebrities gained a sense of legitimacy through their appearance on the programme and the practice has led to the fan-created term 'Sesame Street Cred', which is defined as "What well-known bands or actors acquire when they appear as themselves, or doing their instantly-recognizable acts, on a television program aimed at young children." [478] The advancement in new media technologies has, once again, facilitated this specific targeting towards adults, and the segments are all individually posted on YouTube and can be viewed in isolation. This means that adult audience members can search for specific guest stars (as all videos as titled with the stars' full name, which during the segments themselves they are introduced using their first names only) that they are fans

[476] In season one 14 guest stars appeared in 130 episodes. In season 44 31 guests appeared in 27 episodes.
[477] Christopher Finch, *Jim Henson: The Works : The Art, the Magic, the Imagination* (New York: Random House, 1993), 108.
[478] Anon. "Sesame Street Cred", *Television Tropes and Idioms,* http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/SesameStreetCred

of, and do not have to engage with any extra content not targeted towards them.

The CTW had multiple reasons for wanting to cultivate the absorbed adult audience of *Sesame Street*. Firstly, if their intended parent audience enjoyed watching with their children then the programme had succeeded in promoting co-viewing and the educational benefits it provides. There are, importantly, more reasons that it was beneficial for *Sesame Street* to have a dedicated adult audience. Commercially, adult viewers have more financial independence and are able to buy merchandise relating to their preferred cultural products. The release of *Sesame Street: Old School* and its follow up releases (volumes two, three and four), demonstrates that there is a market among adult viewers for nostalgia-based merchandise, and the existence of the adults section in the *Sesame Street Online Store,* which contains merchandise such as adult size costumes of new Muppet characters, demonstrates that there is also a market for non-nostalgic, contemporary products for the adult audience of *Sesame Street.*[479] While *Sesame Street* is still broadcast on PBS, the vast majority of its revenue is produced through merchandise sales, and financially an adult market is another consumer group that can be monetised.

A dedicated adult audience also offers political protection to public service programmes. In 1994 it was reported that "The public broadcasting system…is the first cultural target of the new Republican majority in Congress, whose

[479] Anon "Adults", *Sesame Street Online Store,* http://store.sesamestreet.org/Dept.aspx?cp=21415_21456_21461_21487

speaker-elect, Newt Gingrich, vowed yesterday to end its $285million budget."[480] Gingrich was strongly opposed to the notion of public service broadcasting, describing it as "this little sandbox for the rich" and arguing that "the only group lobbying (for public broadcasting), are a small group of elitists who want to tax all the American people so they get to spend the money."[481] During the subsequent defence of public service broadcasting *Sesame Street* was often used to demonstrate how valued PBS programming was and how it was a source of high quality programming.[482] To oppose the bill Bert and Ernie joined Nita Lowey at Capitol Hill to condemn the possible cuts to PBS, who utilised rhetoric to position the move as an act of violence against the *Sesame Street* characters and gain support from the American public. Lowey stated "Make no mistake about it, this debate is about Big Bird and Oscar the Grouch and Barney [the Dinosaur] and Kermit and the new Republican majority that would put them on the chopping block."[483] There was a large public outcry in support of PBS and *Sesame Street* and, as Robert Morrow stated, "Strong public support for public broadcasting defeated the conservative proposal."[484] The support for *Sesame Street* was strong and outspoken and adult members of the

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[480] Martin Walker, "World News in Brief: Sesame Street under siege", 9th December 1994, *The Guardian*

[481] Nina J. Easton and Judith Michaelson, "PBS: Behind the Sound and Fury : Why Should Taxpayers Support a 'Sandbox for the Rich'? Critics Ask. Who Would Want to Kill Barney? Backers Cry. Politics and Rhetoric Obscure Fight over Federal Funds for Public Broadcasting.," *Los Angeles Times* January 31st 1995.

[482] Walter Goodman, "If PBS and Newt Gingrich Go Head to Head," *The New York Times*, 19941219 December 19 1994.

[483] Chad Pergram, "The Rumble on Sesame Street," *Fox News*, October 23 2010.

[484] Robert W. Morrow, *Sesame Street and the Reform of Children's Television* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 167.

public who had opposed the bill were horrified that the Republicans had considered cancelling *Sesame Street.*[485]



Figure 38 - Bert and Ernie with Nita Lowey at Capitol Hill

Comments from the public followed similar trends, as people often cited the own fond memories of the programme, how the programme was of such a high quality, and how it performed a great service to children.[486] Due to the American public's own history and emotional attachment to *Sesame Street* characters they were unwilling to see the programme threatened. Having an emotionally invested adult audience had helped *Sesame Street* retain government funding. This event was even referenced in the popular US drama, *The West Wing* (1999-2006) during an episode where a similar debate was occurring in season one's *Take out the Trash Day* (season 1, episode 13). Communications Director Toby Ziegler responds to comments that taxpayers should not subsidise the production of a television programme that makes so

[485] Pergram, "The Rumble on Sesame Street."

[486] David J. Andorsky, "Defending Sesame Street: The Republicans Are out of Touch with American Life," *The Harvard Crimson* January 23 1995.

much money from merchandise by stating that "at a time when the public is rightly concerned about the impact of sex and violence on TV, this administration is going to protect the Muppets!"[487] This demonstrates that the 1994 Bill had a lasting impression on television culture and that the threat of losing *Sesame Street* was still viewed as a legitimate concern. Indeed, it was a concern. In 2012 Republican Presidential Candidate Mitt Romney launched his own attack on PBS, stating that "I'm going to stop the subsidy to PBS… I like PBS. I love Big Bird...But I'm not going to keep on spending money on things to borrow money from China to pay for."[488] Once again the media outcry focussed on using *Sesame Street* characters to garner support for PBS, and news articles were entitled, *Does Mitt Romney want to 'kill' Big Bird?,*[489] *Why Is Mitt Romney Picking a Fight with Big Bird?*[490] and *Mitt Romney Declares War on Big Bird,*[491] once again rhetorically linking the funding cuts with acts of violence and war. There was, once again, public support of PBS and *Sesame Street,* and ultimately Romney lost the election so his plans never came to fruition. This once again demonstrates that the adult audience of *Sesame Street* are continuing to protect the programme politically and are still opposed to any legislation threatening its continued existence. While the CTW could not have predicted

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[487] *The West Wing, Take out the Trash Day* (season 1, episode 13).

[488] Suzie Parker, "Does Mitt Romney Want to Kill Big Bird?". The Washington Post, 9th October 2012. http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/fact-checker/post/does-mitt-romney-want-to-kill-big-bird/2012/10/09/336f9172-127c-11e2-ba83-a7a396e6b2a7_blog.html.

[489] Ibid.

[490] James Poniewozik, "Why Is Mitt Romney Picking a Fight with Big Bird?" *Time*, 5th October 2012, http://entertainment.time.com/2012/10/05/why-is-mitt-romney-picking-a-fight-with-big-bird/.

[491] Timothy Patrick McCarthy, "Mitt Romney Declares War on Big Bird." *The Nation*, 8th October 2012. https://www.thenation.com/article/mitt-romney-declares-war-big-bird/.

these specific political threats back in 1969, due to the political nature of PSB in the US they could recognise that *Sesame Street* having an adult audience could help protect it from similar budget cuts or political threats. The adult audience of *Sesame Street* has therefore benefitted the programme in a variety of ways, from increasing merchandise sales to protection from legislation.[492]

Conclusion

The case study of *Sesame Street* allows a number of factors to be considered when discussing accidental audiences. The definition of the word accidental differs slightly in this chapter, as a certain kind of adult audience was included in the intended audience of the programme (that being parents of the intended child audience). Even if a certain kind of adult audience is planned for, however, an accidental audience of adults that did not fit into that group occurred. This begins to complicate the idea that accidental audiences can only form out of audiences that differ in demographic to the intended audience. The intended audience for the programme was originally pre-school children from disadvantaged background, as *Sesame Street* had strong public service aims to demonstrate that television could be a valuable educating tool and provide young children learning opportunities and basic skills, yet it also managed to

[492] *Sesame Street* signed a five season deal with HBO in August 2015 in order to secure a sustainable funding model. This event occurred too recently for any beneficial analysis of its implications to be included in this thesis, but HBO will now provide 10% of the programme's production costs although new episodes will continue to air on PBS nine months after their debut on HBO.

attract a dedicated adult audience. The initial accidental adult audience of *Sesame Street* was soon absorbed into the CTW's marketing and merchandising strategies and by the mid-1980s became another facet of the programme's intended audience.

A long running tension throughout *Sesame Street's* broadcast is the interplay between what were initially the CTW's public service aims and Henson's commercial ones. However, as funding revenues and government legislation changed, the CTW began to embrace commercial strategies in order to cultivate their absorbed audience and support the programme financially. The programme has had to continue balancing its commercial interest in a financially important adult audience alongside its child-focussed public service aims. Technological advances have allowed a degree of audience segmentation between the child and adult viewers, allowing more content to be targeted at a specific audience segment.

The CTW and Henson had multiple reasons for wanting to cultivate the adult audience of *Sesame Street.* Henson wanted to produce content for adults and had previously aimed his productions at adult audience, and wanted to increase the popularity of his Muppet characters. The CTW benefitted from the adult audience of *Sesame Street* financially, through merchandising and nostalgic products, and also politically. Due to the discreet and widespread nature of the accidental adult audience of *Sesame Street* neither the CTW nor Henson had to directly address the adult audience, or manage the public

perception of the audience, and could easily incorporate them into the intended audience of the programme.

Conclusion: Expecting the Unexpected

Television audiences are inherently unpredictable and exist within a constant state of flux. Regardless of how advanced audience rating technology has become it remains impossible to predict exactly what specific programmes (or elements within them) audiences will be attracted to. However, while television audiences may be unpredictable that does not mean they are unmanageable. As this thesis has demonstrated, the television industry employs a number of strategies and tactics to manage the unexpected viewerships that form around its programming, such audiences tending to be either absorbed or denied. The tendency to absorb or deny unexpected viewerships forms the basis of the accidental audience framework developed in this thesis. Critically, this thesis has addressed three main research questions: 1) how does the television industry react to audiences it did not expect to form around its programmes? 2) What specific strategies are developed and used by the television industry to manage these audiences? 3) How does the cultural and industrial context of the programme shape those management strategies? The accidental audience framework offers a new way of understanding the relationship between, and strategies employed by, the television industry when managing its audience.

An inherent aspect of the accidental audience framework is that the television industry's conception of the audience does not always correspond with the actual television audience. The first aim of this thesis was, therefore, to examine the limitations and blind spots of the tools, methods and concepts the

industry use to understand its audience in order to explain the discrepancy between the intended audience of a programme and the actual audience. Chapter 1 outlined the history of the television ratings system in order to trace how the television industry constructs the television audience and how it conceives of the intended audience for its programming as a numerical ratings share. This chapter highlighted how segmenting the audience into demographics became and remains the leading factor in the industry's conception of the audience. It argued that as technologies have advanced the conception of the television audience has become increasingly granular,[493] which results in programming designed to appeal to specific demographics. By tracking what types of programming these demographics were attracted to, the television industry constructed an intended audience for its programming. This granular conception, however, does not translate cleanly when applied to the actual television audience.

Having established that the television industry conceptualised the television audience as separate, increasingly granular, demographics that have specific preferences and tastes in their programming, Chapter 2 acted to complicate and problematize this industrial conceptualisation by discussing the complexity and unpredictability of audiences.[494] It used Napoli's work on *The Audience Marketplace* to highlight the discrepancy between predicted, measured, and

[493] Golding, "The Cost of Citizenship in the Digital Age."; Buzzard, *Tracking the Audience: The Ratings Industry From analog to Digital*.; Gentikow, "Television use in New Media Environments."
[494] Ang, *Desperately Seeking the Audience*.

actual audiences.[495] It is from within this discrepancy that accidental audiences emerge, granting a name to those who exist within the actual audience, but not the intended audience. From this, the accidental audience framework demonstrated how the television industry has reacted to, and sought to manage, this audience. When the accidental audience is viewed opportunistically then it can become part of the intended audience and is encouraged and cultivated to continue engaging with the programme, making it an absorbed audience. Conversely, if the accidental audience is viewed as a threat then it can dissuaded from engaging with the programme, transforming it into a denied audience. The framework demonstrates that these tendencies lead to accidental audiences either being absorbed or denied by the television industry, and proposes a way of understanding a particular set of relationships and negotiations that take place between the television industry and its audiences.

The subsequent three chapters detailed context specific case studies that explored the relationship between the television industry and its audience. While all three case studies were taken from children's television programming, each one emerged from a different production context in order to demonstrate how the specific cultural and industrial context of a programme can influence how an accidental audience is viewed and impact and shape the strategies used to manage it.

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[495] Napoli, *Audience Economics: Media Institutions and the Audience Marketplace*.

Chapter 3 used the example of Bronies, adult male fans of *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* (*MLP:FIM),* to demonstrate the process of transforming an accidental audience into an absorbed audience and highlighted the strategies used to achieve this outcome. This chapter demonstrated that accidental audiences can be favourable for programmes, as they open up more merchandising opportunities and can be monetized. Importantly, the process of absorbing an audience is not simple, as the brand identity of the programme must be protected and maintained to ensure the programme remains suitable for the original intended audience of the programme. This means that, during the absorption process, Hasbro (the creators of *MLP: FIM)* had to address and reframe the negative image of Bronies that had appeared in the popular press and re-brand the Brony audience into an audience suitable for *MLP: FIM* and its intended audience of girls aged 2-11. This was achieved primarily through Lauren Faust, the creative director of season 1, who legitimised certain brand-friendly aspects of the Brony audience in order to draw attention away from aspects of the Brony audience that threatened the programme's brand. This process primarily occurred in the press, with Faust giving interviews and talks to various news outlets in both traditional and online spaces, but was reinforced by actions such as website takedowns, which aimed to discourage the unsavoury behaviour of certain aspects of the Brony audience. This resulted in a careful amalgamation of management strategies, some focussed on highlighting the positive aspects of the Brony audience publically, and others trying to suppress and discourage the negative aspects of the audience more covertly. This chapter also explored how these strategies operated within

the context of a franchise. While the Brony audience originated with the television cartoon, during the absorption process they were brought into the intended audience of the wider franchise, with specific toys and figures being developed specifically for them.

Hasbro and Bronies constituted an example of how accidental audiences have been seen positively and, with some modifications, transformed into an absorbed audience. This example, however, emerged from a commercial US production context, where the Brony audience was valued due to their merchandise buying power. Contrasting with this, Chapter 4 explored how an accidental audience formed around a UK public service programme and the ways in which this context affected the perception of this audience. To this end, the discussion of *Teletubbies* served to highlight how an accidental audience could be viewed as a liability and a threat, and how an accidental audience can be transformed into a denied audience. In this instance, due to the BBC's status as a public service broadcaster, the accidental student audience of *Teletubbies* was seen as a threat to the brand image of both the programme and the broadcaster in ways that would potentially lessen its reputation with the general public. The management strategies used by the BBC focused on creating a rhetoric of silence around the student audience, refusing to acknowledge their existence in public and utilising website shutdowns. This was to focus the public discourses around the series on the positive aspects of the programme, such as its value for toddlers, and to ignore anything that conflicted with this image, even to the point of denying that alternative viewers

existed. This chapter also explored how at the particular historical moment this accidental audience formed (1997/1998), the BBC was dealing with increasing digitisation and preparing to launch two new digital channels devoted to children's programming. This meant that the BBC was concerned with strengthening its existing brand identity, especially its children's brand, and that the industrial context of the time shaped the BBC's response.

Having explored two key tendencies in managing unexpected viewerships, Chapter 5 functioned to complicate the framework and demonstrate the fluidity of the accidental audience. By discussing the adult non-parent accidental audience of *Sesame Street* this chapter examined how, although there are some tensions that must be navigated, accidental audiences can be beneficial for public service broadcasters. It also offered a historical example of an accidental audience that demonstrates that these relationships and strategies existed before the internet and also how the status of an accidental audience can change over time. The duelling influences of the CTW and Jim Henson placed *Sesame Street* within a complex production context. As funding revenues and government legislation changed, the CTW began to embrace commercial strategies in order to absorb this accidental audience in order to support the programme financially. The development of *The Muppets* briefly moved the adult audience's attention away from *Sesame Street,* but after its end *Sesame Street* incorporated popular elements from *The Muppets* to absorb the non-parent audience back into their intended audience. This demonstrated the fluctuation in management strategies over the years; as the relationship

between the CTW and the accidental audience changed, it moved between absorbing and denying the audience. This chapter also explored how technological advancements have shaped the different strategies used to manage accidental audiences. Technological advances over the runtime of *Sesame Street* have allowed a degree of audience segmentation between the child and adult viewers. Beginning with the release of the early seasons on DVD, which separated out segments and allowed viewers to skip through to their favourite scenes, and more recently seen with newer platforms such as YouTube, content can now be more directly targeted at specific audience segments. This means that the programme can curate content that appeals to its adult audience in a way that separates them from their child audience.

Each case study has presented different strategies that have been developed and used by the television industry to manage the accidental audience. Some common characteristics emerge, however, when shifting from looking at the specifics of each case study to the overarching patterns. When the accidental audience is viewed positively and absorbed into the intended audience the strategies tend to be displayed publicly. Faust spoke about her (and Hasbro's) acceptance of Bronies to traditional and online news media and merchandise created for them was displayed publically. On the other hand, when the accidental audience is viewed negatively and the strategies aim to discourage and deny the audience they are more covert. Both Hasbro and the BBC utilised website takedowns to try and suppress the undesirable aspects of their

accidental audiences, and the BBC created a rhetoric of silence to downplay and obscure the existence of their accidental student audience.

While the first two case studies present the conclusion that within a commercial production context the accidental audience is absorbed and within a public service context it is denied, this is an oversimplification. As *Sesame Street* demonstrates, public service programming can also benefit from absorbing an accidental audience. Hasbro was concerned with benefitting from merchandise aimed at their accidental audience, the BBC was concerned with protecting their brand image and ensuring the British public still found them valuable, and the CTW was concerned with both merchandising opportunities and political support. This chapter also explored the idea that accidental audiences are more complex that simply being a different demographic to the intended audience. *Sesame Street* had adults as part of its initial intended audience, so the accidental adult audience of the programme were not accidental because of their age. Instead the accidental adult audience were the 'wrong' type of adult as they did not have children also watching the programme.

This thesis has proposed a framework for understanding a particular set of relationships and negotiations that take place between the television industry and its audiences. Referring back to Kompare, Johnson, and Santos' definition of media management as "a culture of shifting discourses, dispositions, and

tactics,"[496] this thesis has argued that the accidental audience framework adds to the field of media management by hypothesising how the industry tends towards one of two dispositions, they are either disposed to view the accidental audience as a threat or an opportunity. This is influenced by, and results in, a number of discourses. News and the media can create discursive noise around a programme and an accidental audience, which can influence the industry's disposition towards said accidental audience. The industry itself can also operate within discourses when managing an accidental audience. For example, when Hasbro was absorbing the Brony audience they operates within a 're-framing' discourse, because they wanted to reframe the Brony audience into an appropriate audience of the programme by highlighting their positive characteristics. In contrast, when the BBC was denying the student audience of *Teletubbies,* they created a discourse of silence in order to downplay this audience's existence and limit the amount of media attention it received. When discussing the example of *Sesame Street,* the CTW's disposition was not as clear cut, and changed over time. Within these discourses a number of tactics and strategies operate. In order to generate the 're-framing' discourse around Bronies, Hasbro actively endorsed the positive aspects of the audience through interviews, public statements, and advertising. These strategies resulted in the audience being successfully absorbed into the intended audience of *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic.* The BBC, when generating a discourse of silence around its accidental audience, used strategies such as

[496] Derek Johnson, Derek Kompare, and Avi Santo, eds., *Making Media Work: Cultures of Management in the Entertainment Industries*, Critical Cultural Communication (New York and London: New York University Press, 2014), 2.

website shutdowns, which limited the exposure of the student *Teletubbies* audience and resulted in them transforming into a denied audience. In *Sesame Street* the discourse changed depending on the time period and context, so when *The Muppets* was airing there was a slight discourse of denial around the accidental audience, but once *The Muppets* was cancelled, the discourse developed into a more positive one, and the strategies used by the CTW changed to reflect that changing discourse, as they started to produce more merchandise for the non-parent audience and incorporate popular sketch formats from *The Muppets* into the programme. These are a number of the different tactics used by the television industry to ensure accidental audiences do not interfere with the brand identity of a programme.

This thesis has used the example of the television industry and children's programming as a means of exploring unexpected viewerships and management strategies that develop around accidental audiences. The scope of the thesis has focussed specifically on children's television because, as discussed in the introduction, children's television programming has a carefully constructed brand image and intended audience. In doing so, this thesis has only touched on a very small aspect of the accidental audience. As discussed in Chapter 2, the accidental audience framework is designed to be flexible and applicable to a range of media audiences. There are, therefore, other contexts in which the framework can be applied and within the context of the television industry there are a multitude of accidental audiences that are worthy of consideration and further study. Rather than accidental audiences that differ

in age from the intended audience, for example, other demographic classifications, such as gender, can be seen to have formed the basis of other accidental audiences.

For instance, in 2005 Albie Hecht was fired as chief of Spike TV, a US cable channel that broadcasts a mix of fictional programming and combat sporting events, due to the channel attracting too many female viewers.[497] The channel had previously described itself as 'the first network for men'[498] and executives at Viacom (who owned the channel) were unhappy that the female audience of the channel had risen from 32% to 42% of total viewers, as this threatened the channel's brand image. In this instance the accidental audience for Spike TV were women (primarily aged 18-49 years old and many reported to be watching the channel's repeats of *CSI*[499]), and in 2005 Spike TV and Viacom were aiming to transform this audience into a denied audience. However, in 2015 Spike TV announced that they were pushing for female audience growth. Journalist Adam Buckman wrote that "the once completely male-oriented Spike TV yesterday ballyhooed the growth of its female audience and vowed to continue to work toward evolving its dual-gender 'co-viewing' in the coming

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[497] Anon, "Spike Tv Chief Albie Hecht Fired for Luring Women Viewers," *Reality TV World,* 31st January 2005. http://www.realitytvworld.com/news/spike-tv-chief-albie-hecht-fired-for-luring-women-viewers-1001705.php.

[498] Anon, ""The First Network for Men Has a Name: It's Spike TV*!*" *PR Newswire*, 6Th May 2003. http://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/the-first-network-for-men-has-a-name-its-spike-tv-70861647.html.

[499] Marisa Guthrie, "Cover Story: Breathing New Life into Oxygen," *Broadcasting & Cable: The Business of Television*, 11th April 2009. http://www.broadcastingcable.com/news/programming/cover-story-breathing-new-life-oxygen/34522.

year."[500] Furthermore, Spike President Kevin Kay told advertising executives that "we have at record speed transformed our network from where it began 12 years ago as the first network for men to one that is compelling, inclusive and female-friendly."[501] In the ten year period since Hecht had been fired the channel had been unable to reduce its female audience, as demonstrated by Kay stating that "in 2010, just 34% of our audience was female"[502] showing only a small decrease from 2005. Due to the failure of Spike TV to manage through denial their accidental female audience, the channel instead changed tactics and decided to capitalise on this audience and transform them into an absorbed audience. This serves as an example of an accidental audience emerging from gender distinctions and an accidental audience operating on a channel rather than programme level.[503]

While this thesis has examined the accidental audience from an industry management perspective, the framework could also be applied to examples that emerge from audience studies and fan studies. For example, fansubbing communities of Japanese anime in the US demonstrate an accidental audience that emerged out of a transnational context and one that would be fruitful to examine from an audience studies standpoint. In this example, the intended audience was Japanese viewers and the accidental audience was US adults. A

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[500] Adam Buckman, "At Upfront, Formerly All-Male Spike Pushes Female Audience Growth." *Media Post*, 4th March 2015. http://www.mediapost.com/publications/article/244955/at-upfront-formerly-all-male-spike-pushes-female.html.

[501] Ibid.

[502] Ibid.

[503] Catherine Johnson, "Telebranding in TVIII: The Network as Brand and the Programme as Brand," *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 5, no. 1 (2007).

wave of Americans became interested in Japanese cultural products in the 1960s and 70s as they studied there or served in the US military and were stationed there.[504] The introduction of VCR technology into the US and Japanese mass markets in 1975 made sharing anime possible, as fans could show tapes to others in the US. These tapes were still in Japanese, so US fans started forming groups that could produce subtitled VHS tapes, which became very popular.[505] Due to the growing popularity of anime in the early 1990s a number of US companies began to import anime. Sean Leonard argues that "the fan culture played a pivotal role in each company's formation and initial operation, although the circumstances are unique to each company"[506] and there is now a large amount of anime imported into the US. The example of fansubbers demonstrates how audience behaviour can have a significant impact on how the television industry responds to an accidental audience. In this case, it was only due to the accidental audience that the television industry in the US realised there was a market for anime and many of the import companies would not have had an audience with a fansubbing-built customer base.[507] Looking at this example allows the framework of the accidental audience to consider a transnational accidental audience and an accidental audience of a genre rather than a programme. Fansubbing also expands the

[504] Adam Rush, "Otaku Creations: The Participatory Culture of Fansubbing," *Kinephanos* 1 (2009).
[505] Adam Rush, "Otaku Creations: The Participatory Culture of Fansubbing," *Kinephanos* 1 (2009).
[506] Sean Leonard, "Progress against the Law: Fan Distribution, Copyright, and the Explosive Growth Of Japanese Animation " (Massachusetts: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2004), 24.
[507] Jordan S. Hatcher, "Of Otakus and Fansubs: A Critical Look at Anime Online in Light of Current Issues in Copyright Law," *Script-ed* 2, no. 4 (2005): 565.

discussion into debates around audiences and fans, as within this example there is more intersect between audience behaviours and management strategies. Interrogating this example using elements of both media management studies and audience studies could help nuance the discussion and help deepen the understanding of the power shifts and dynamics in the industry/audience relationship.

This thesis has examined some of the management strategies used by the television industry to attempt to react to, and gain a semblance of control over, an audience it did not expect. Through examining these strategies, this thesis was able to draw out different tendencies in the way that management strategies operate and are operationalised, which became the basis for the accidental audience framework. The framework demonstrates that these tendencies lead to accidental audiences either being absorbed by the television industry or denied by them. This framework proposes a way of understanding a particular set of relationships and negotiations that take place between the television industry and its audiences. The accidental audience has contributed to our understanding of how media industries, in this case the television industry, develop audience strategies at the level of media management. The contribution of this thesis has not only been to deploy this framework, but also examine how, and why, these tendencies have been performed in particular context specific case studies.

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