**Audience**

Audience theory provides a starting point for many Media Studies tasks. Whether you are constructing a text or analysing one, you will need to consider the destination of that text (i.e. its target audience) and how that audience (or any other) will respond to that text.

Remember that a media text in itself has no meaning until it is read or decoded by an audience.

For GCSE, you learned how audience is [described and measured](http://www.mediaknowall.com/gcse/keyconceptsgcse/audiencegcse.html). Now you need a working knowledge of the theories which attempt to explain how an audience receives, reads and responds to a text. Over the course of the past century or so, media analysts have developed several **effects models**, ie theoretical explanations of how humans ingest the information transmitted by media texts and how this might influence (or not) their behaviour. Effects theory is still a very hotly debated area of Media and Psychology research, as no one is able to come up with indisputable evidence that audiences will always react to media texts one way or another. The scientific debate is clouded by the politics of the situation: some audience theories are seen as a call for more censorship, others for less control. Whatever your personal stance on the subject, you must understand the following theories and how they may be used to deconstruct the relationship between audience and text.

**1. The Hypodermic Needle Model**

Dating from the 1920s, this theory was the first attempt to explain how mass audiences might react to mass media. It is a crude model (see picture!) and suggests that audiences passively receive the information transmitted via a media text, without any attempt on their part to process or challenge the data. Don't forget that this theory was developed in an age when the mass media were still fairly new - radio and cinema were less than two decades old. Governments had just discovered the power of advertising to communicate a message, and produced **propaganda** to try and sway populaces to their way of thinking. This was particularly rampant in Europe during the First World War (look at some posters [here](http://hsc.csu.edu.au/modern_history/core_study/ww1/posters/page75.htm)) and its aftermath.

Basically, the Hypodermic Needle Model suggests that the information from a text passes into the mass consciouness of the audience **unmediated**, ie the experience, intelligence and opinion of an individual are not relevant to the reception of the text. This theory suggests that, as an audience, we are manipulated by the creators of media texts, and that our behaviour and thinking might be easily changed by media-makers. It assumes that the audience are **passive** and **heterogenous**. This theory is still quoted during [moral panics](http://www.mediaknowall.com/violence/moralpanics.html) by parents, politicians and pressure groups, and is used to explain why certain groups in society should not be exposed to certain media texts (comics in the 1950s, rap music in the 2000s), for fear that they will watch or read sexual or violent behaviour and will then act them out themselves.

**2. Two-Step Flow**

The Hypodermic model quickly proved too clumsy for media researchers seeking to more precisely explain the relationship between audience and text. As the mass media became an essential part of life in societies around the world and did NOT reduce populations to a mass of unthinking drones, a more sophisticated explanation was sought.

Paul Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson, and Hazel Gaudet analysed the voters' decision-making processes during a 1940 presidential election campaign and published their results in a paper called *The People's Choice*. Their findings suggested that the information does not flow directly from the text into the minds of its audience unmediated but is filtered through "opinion leaders" who then communicate it to their less active associates, over whom they have influence. The audience then mediate the information received directly from the media with the ideas and thoughts expressed by the opinion leaders, thus being influenced not by a direct process, but by a two step flow. This diminished the power of the media in the eyes of researchers, and caused them to conclude that social factors were also important in the way in which audiences interpreted texts. This is sometimes referred to as the **limited effects paradigm**.

* [The Two Step Flow Of Communication Theory](http://www.ojla.eu/pubfiles/TSCT.doc) - A short paper by Sarah Griswold
* [Two Step Flow Theory](http://www.utwente.nl/cw/theorieenoverzicht/Levels%20of%20theories/macro/Two-Step%20Flow%20Theory.doc/)—Clear summary of Katz & Lazarsfield, with diagrams
* [Katz & Lazarsfeld: Two Step Flow](http://www.cultsock.org/index.php?page=media/kl.html) - Mick Underwood

**3. Uses & Gratifications**

During the 1960s, as the first generation to grow up with television became grown ups, it became increasingly apparent to media theorists that audiences made choices about what they did when consuming texts. Far from being a passive mass, audiences were made up of individuals who actively consumed texts for different reasons and in different ways. In 1948 Lasswell suggested that media texts had the following functions for individuals and society:

* surveillance
* correlation
* entertainment
* cultural transmission

Researchers Blulmer and Katz expanded this theory and published their own in 1974, stating that individuals might choose and use a text for the following purposes (ie uses and gratifications):

* Diversion - escape from everyday problems and routine.
* Personal Relationships - using the media for emotional and other interaction, eg) substituting soap operas for family life
* Personal Identity - finding yourself reflected in texts, learning behaviour and values from texts
* Surveillance - Information which could be useful for living eg) weather reports, financial news, holiday bargains

Since then, the list of Uses and Gratifications has been extended, particularly as new media forms have come along (eg video games, the internet)

* [Why Do People Watch Television?](http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/short/usegrat.html) - an exploration of Uses & Gratifications by Daniel Chandler
* [Uses & Gratifications/Dependency Theory](http://zimmer.csufresno.edu/~johnca/spch100/7-4-uses.htm) - E Rossi

**4. Reception Theory**

Extending the concept of an active audience still further, in the 1980s and 1990s a lot of work was done on the way individuals received and interpreted a text, and how their individual circumstances (gender, class, age, ethnicity) affected their reading.

This work was based on Stuart Hall's **encoding/decoding** model of the relationship between text and audience - the text is encoded by the producer, and decoded by the reader, and there may be major differences between two different readings of the same code. However, by using recognised codes and conventions, and by drawing upon audience expectations relating to aspects such as genre and use of stars, the producers can **position** the audience and thus create a certain amount of agreement on what the code means. This is known as a **preferred** reading.

* [Reception Theory](http://free-books-online.org/mastering_communication/theories-of-communication/reception-theory/)
* [Audience Research: Reception Theory](http://www.museum.tv/eotvsection.php?entrycode=audiencereser) — Museum of Broadcast Communications
* [Reception Studies and Classical Film Theory](http://www.filmreference.com/encyclopedia/Independent-Film-Road-Movies/Reception-Theory-RECEPTION-STUDIES-AND-CLASSICALFILM-THEORY.html)