

Nine strange things about audiences

Health Warning

These nine points are going to make you feel uncomfortable.

1 Audiences want the same and different

Audiences don't want to waste their time. Suppose they tune into a programme at 6 pm because they think they will like it. Experience shows us that they give the programme between 3 and 5 minutes to be interesting and hold their attention. If, after 5 minutes it still does not grab them, they have plenty of alternatives (40% of the public has 30 or more channels to choose from.)¹

Television is something audiences watch regularly. Each time they switch on, they want to see something new.

However, how do they know they are going to like it? In the same way as the programme buyer ponders over whether audiences will like the programme, the audiences also worry about whether it will engage them, and satisfy them emotionally.

It's 5 pm. Mrs Average viewer comes home, and opens the TV guide for something to watch after dinner at 8 pm. There is a choice of four channels. She doesn't know any of the programmes.

So, she carefully reads the ten-word description in small type under the programme listing in the TV Guide, or the Electronic Programme Guide (EPG).

She desperately searches for something that might give her an indication that she will like the programme.

After all, she knows only too well the consequences of tuning into a programme and then not liking it. After five minutes of watching something she can't stand, she simply must press the remote and find something else.

BUT, she is now five minutes late for the programme she has now selected, and is struggling to find out what is going on. She is furious. She vows never to watch that misleading channel again. By selecting the wrong programme, one she doesn't like, she has in fact wasted a full hour of her time. She gets onto the phone and moans to her best friend how awful TV is, and how there is never anything to watch.

This is the result of what I call the Holiday Inn Syndrome.

You may be very adventurous, and if you have the money you enjoy travelling to exotic places with strange cultures and strange languages. But after a full day of struggling with a phrase book or interpreter, by the time you get to the hotel in the evening, you want something comfortable and familiar. You have had just about enough for one day of novelty and surprise. That's why you booked into the local Holiday Inn in the first place. It's familiar. The room looks just like any other Holiday Room in the world. The menu is the same, and the food tastes the same. You seek comfort in the familiar.

That's why the viewers want to know that it is a documentary about penguins, because they like documentaries about penguins, or they hate them. They want to know that it has a performer in it that they like, or it is a story about things they like.

¹ By the way, the time the audience gives hit song or music video to grab their attention is only 11 seconds.

Hence, we have stars, reality shows (and other styles) that all look the same, and writers and directors that the audiences consistently like or dislike.

Hence the trend away from one-off dramas and documentaries to series and serials. After all, if they like the first episode, you are almost guaranteed to have them in rapt attention for the next twelve, or 25 episodes, or for as long as we can afford to contract.

The paradox: the audience always wants something different, but within that difference, they want something the same. They hate repeats (unless it was last shown three years ago or longer).

2 Audiences watch programmes, not channels

It's because of the previous point, that audiences watch programmes, not channels. Sure, they watch channels if the channel shows the programmes THEY want to see, and as long as the programmes they want follow on from each other.

With so much to choose from, do people really know what they want?

Yes. They want what they feel comfortable with, but different from the last time they watched something of the same genre, with the same performers, and roughly on the same subject.

Spending millions on channel branding is a waste of money. If you want to change the brand, spend R50 000, and the rest on programme marketing. Brand loyalty is important when you must go all the way to the supermarket to buy washing powder.

It's of far less importance when your brand can be destroyed in an instant by the dreaded Terminator Remote. When programmes are popular, the audience is being loyal to the programme, not the channel.

Individuals watch a staggeringly narrow range of channels when presented with a bouquet of 30 or more channels. They have a narrow range of interests, especially the youth who are heavily influenced by peer pressure.

Broadcasters don't do ethnographic research anymore because they found it costly with mass audiences. Ethnographic audience research is when a researcher spends days with one family studying their likes, dislikes, what they do, and what motivates all their behaviour. But we don't have mass audiences with multi-channel TV. We have niche audiences.

We have moved from the Age of Mass Media, to the Age of Masses of Media.

Now that audiences are smaller, niche, and have more in common with each other, costly ethnographic research is exactly what broadcasters should spend their money on.

3 Audiences love celebrities

Celebrities are the cornerstone of all our modern media. They are not a biological phenomenon. They are manufactured by the media, and are designed to bring in greater income to the media.

It's not technically a cult, but it has the same result: it leads to the celebrity being idolised. This idolisation sells newspapers, radio programmes, television shows, YouTube Channels, WhatsApp groups, Twitter followers, and merchandise. Nowadays "celebrity" always seems to result in the launch of a new perfume.

Celebrities are not new; people have become national heroes since the beginning of humankind. What is different now is the ease by which a person can become a celebrity without any specific talents, gifts or achievements.

If they actually have achievements, they tend to remain in the spotlight. But the celebrity business is full of “one-month wonders” in the same way as pop music is populated with manufactured “one hit wonders” that supply a hefty part of their sales.

The same applies to all media.

The appeal of reality shows for television is that the performers are cheap. They are new to the business, and in many cases, so anxious to appear on TV that they may in fact be willing to pay the producer.

It is inevitable that one or more of the performers in a reality show will become celebrities, usually for a very short time. Their reign must come to an end before the public become aware of their distinctive lack of talent. Sometimes it comes to an end when they start charging high appearance and endorsement fees. The crossover point comes when it is cheaper to manufacture a new celebrity than it is to hire an existing one.

From the audiences' point of view, being a celebrity personifies “success”. This is part of everyone's basic motivational needs, and rests in Maslow's hierarchy of needs as “esteem”, the desire to look good in your own eyes and in the eyes of others.

Every one of us wants to do achieve something that earns the respect and praise of others.

When we see how a person achieves mass praise seemingly with great ease, it is the ease with which they achieved celebrity-hood, and the intensity of the adoration of the fans, that becomes the source of pleasure, aspiration, and a warped perception of one's own abilities.

It embodies our hopes for achieving a praiseworthy life, and our fears that we will out our lifespan in obscurity and mediocrity.

Celebrities tap into the audience's primal fantasies and basic emotions, lifting people from their everyday lives and making them believe anything is possible.²

Remember that fantasies are no more than hopes, driven by fears, and fed by creative imagination. Imagination and creativity is not a rare gift limited to the talented. It is the ability to form mental images, sensations and concepts, when they are not perceived through sight, hearing or other senses. Imagination helps provide meaning to experience and understanding to knowledge; it is a fundamental facility through which people make sense of the world, and it also plays a key role in the learning process.

It is accepted as the innate ability and process of inventing partial or complete personal realms within the mind from elements derived from sense perceptions of the shared world.

Imagination is an ability possessed by everyone. It is what brings our hopes and fears to life. Once we see them in our imagination, they become something physical to fear, and to hope for.

If people are not particularly talented, and accept it, they nevertheless enjoy following celebrities, and it satisfies their social needs by giving them a subject and reason for conversation and integration with other people.

Unless the celebrity attained status by virtue of their own talents and achievements, such a talented sports stars or leading statesmen like Nelson Mandela, they must have one quality - and that is media beauty. They must be gorgeous. “Gorgeous” means complying with the current taste on physical beauty.

There's nothing particularly complex about the psychology of audiences being curious or even adoring celebrities. What is a fact, is that celebrities are good for attracting

² John Lucas, M.D., clinical assistant professor, psychology, Weill Cornell Medical College, and assistant attending psychiatrist, New York-Presbyterian Hospital, New York City, quoted in Business week 28 June 2009.

audiences. They are an essential part of the Holiday Inn Syndrome. They provide something familiar that entices people to choose one specific programme to watch.

In short, celebrities are becoming more and more essential in a highly competitive and multi-channel environment.

The secret of success for the broadcaster is to own enough of them, or manufacture them quickly enough.

There are some overlapping terms that marketers of the media can choose at will: celebrity, personality, diva, guru, and role model. Strictly speaking, they have different meanings, but for marketers, you just use the one that looks best for the purpose.

4 Audiences love victims

Focussing on the underdog reminds the viewer how well-off she is. It is therefore comforting and appeals to perverse pleasure and comfort.

“True victimhood is accompanied by feelings of pain and powerlessness, and for the rest of us to make some attempt to empathise with that condition must be both humanitarian and desirable. However, it tends to make victimhood glamorous, and to endow the victim with special privileges. “Hence, because I “was bullied at school” or “was sexually abused”, I can claim special kinship with generations of victims, past and present.”³

This makes TV programmes about victims, or emphasising the victimhood in TV programmes so appealing to audiences, and so easy for broadcasters to exploit. The cult of the victim extends even to TV documentaries about the wealthy and privileged which are peppered with commentary such as, “He was a victim of his own success.”

The Cult of the Victim is a journalistic style that started off with the “penny-press” in America in the 1840’s and was perfected by tabloid news in the twentieth century. In the 21st century, it is established as “the way it’s done”. In short, it’s a journalistic cult.

A story must always start off with a victim. The story should continue as the victim’s point of view. By the end of the story, the victim should if possible remain a victim so that the viewer’s emotions are aroused in intense feelings of indignation, sorrow and pity.

It works best on TV, even better than it does in the print media. It is highly effective in social media.

It has unfortunate consequences in that the context becomes one person. The background, the history and the causes pale into insignificance while the demands for entertainment do battle with the constraints of time.

Television executives claim that this technique allows the viewer to identify with the victim and to feel with them. It is far more likely that the viewer feels the pleasure of their comfortable lifestyle, and has a rather perverse feeling of superior pity for the victim.

There is hardly anything anyone can do to change this. TV channels compete with one another to deliver a more wretched victim than the other. Sometimes even blatant criminals become celebrities, manufactured by the media and consumed by blood thirsty consumers. (This motivation is the same as that of watching a horror movie – you can be part of it, without the dangers or the consequences. It’s both danger and adventure wearing a condom.)

The ideal for television, i.e. the most income producing, is when a victim graduates from their victimhood to becoming a celebrity. This includes all the victims of fraudsters. When gangsters become celebrities, the lines of morality become blurred. Gangsters tend to be

³ The Independent. Simon Wessely. Saturday 29 May 1999

glamorous – but's that's another story. The worst behaviour on Big Brother becomes the most celebrated.

Both the Cult of the Celebrity and the Cult of the Victim are important in targeting audiences.

Different audiences have different preferences in the type of victim and the type of celebrity they will like. Broadcasters must conduct careful, research into the fan base and the durability of celebrities before including them on programme concepts and programme purchases.

5 Audiences want to be sick, not healthy

If I see you, I'll greet you, "How are you?" You respond, "I'm fine and you?" You end the conversation with, "Fine."

That's the end of the conversation.

However, if the initial response to "How are you?" had been, "I'm ill. I have Listeriosis, and Pleurisy. I'm in such pain, I just don't feel pain anymore." Then the immediate response will be "What?? I'm so sorry. How did you get these sicknesses?" Now we have a real conversation about to start. The ill person gets tons of sympathy

People want attention and they want sympathy. They are not going to get sympathetic attention when they are well and healthy

Ask any producer of a talk or magazine show – "What do you do when audience ratings start dropping?" They'll tell you to go for the Hypochondriac Strategy.

Under this strategy, you get hold of a doctor (preferably a Professor of Medicine), and interview that professor about a new condition, or illness, or outbreak or something to do with illness. "So, Professor, what are first signs of this condition?" "Well," answers the Professor, "It starts off with a pain in the left knee." You now have 1-million people feeling their left knees, and saying, "But I get that". And the audience is hooked. It works every time. Unfortunately, television producers use this strategy to ill effect, and often it leads to distortion of reality. An example is the doping of hyperactive school children with tranquilising drugs, over-reaction to temperatures above 30 degrees centigrade (and the increased sale of bottled water at 2000 times the cost of perfectly good tap water), and claims by psychologists that matric is stressful for parents and students, and that all parents of Grade 12 students must go for therapy.⁴

The use of the Hypochondriac Strategy, which is gleefully supported by the various medical and para-medical professions, as well as the pharmaceutical industry must be examined for the potential to undermine media ethics. These programmes draw a fine line being independent and objective editorial and "advertorial", or what the marketing industry now call "native advertising".

But the strategy does sell a lot of vitamin pills.

6 Audiences love conspiracy theories

Why do audiences love conspiracy theories so much?

People fall for the New World Order and Illuminati. The bulk of the audience is unemployed, or perceive themselves to be badly paid, all to the profit of the Fat Cat capitalists. They feel that they are victims of things beyond their control. When a conspiracy theorist confirms what they think, then you have hit on your hands.

⁴ ENCA Wednesday 3 January 2018 - 7:40pm

You can out into the same category visits by aliens, alien abduction, the power of the Great Pyramid, Erich von Däniken and the teachings of fringe “churches” and cults.

It ties up with point 3 above, and can be extended to “People want to be victims”. They want an excuse for their own inadequacies, or laziness, or perceptions of their own alienation from society, or that society has total control over them.

It’s an extreme form of the common “resistance to change” that most people have. People don’t want to change, or for things to change around them. People want stability. If they want emotional instability, they will watch soaps, where they can look on in the safety of their armchairs. We call this “vicarious content”, experienced in the imagination through the feelings or actions of another person.

People will watch bungee jumping, but thankfully don’t do it (it invariably leads to detached retinas).

They watch horror movies, and the genre VMH, or Violence, Mayhem and Horror. The danger is only an electronic image on the screen. They can empathise with the feelings, but the audience itself is safe from harm of any kind.

All of these are versions of resistance to change.

Individuals feel badly treated at work because of criticism of their standard of performance, but they would rather blame it on the boss who doesn’t like them, than go for training. Most people resist training as they don’t want to reveal that they don’t understand, and look stupid, in front of others.

“It’s the bosses fault, not mine.”

“Everyone has it in for me” is the starting point for the person who is devoted to conspiracy theories. Politics in news relies heavily on conspiracy theories. When a news commentator states that there are two or three possibilities, that person has started a conspiracy theory, because the two or three possibilities are in fact, a conspiracy. The programmers just must build on that, and you have a full-blown conspiracy theory, and consequently a popular programme. Fringe news channels survive because they rely on converting their interpretation of news into conspiracy theories. ANN7 is a good example. Their viewers love the channel, and that is what programme managers want: the audience to love the programmes.

Conspiracy Theories “explain” things. They explain why you are discriminated against, don’t earn enough, are forced to use public transport because you have no car.

Conspiracy Theories make you feel good, because you don’t have to do any work improving yourself, or participate in social change. The programme content reinforces your preference to sit back and watch, and not do any work. You can’t do any work – it’s pointless, because the Conspiracy Theory explains that all effort is pointless. Forces too great for you to overcome make any effort irrelevant.

Everybody loves a good Conspiracy Theory.

7 Audiences need something to talk about

We have a young person. She is not particularly attractive, perhaps overweight, plain and with a very ordinary personality. She is also very shy. She has no boyfriend and very few other friends. She works in the computer department of a large company capturing information into a keyboard - very mundane work.

Every evening she watches Generations, or Isidingo. She takes the bus to work, and starts work. The first highlight of her day is teatime when she gets to talk to her co-workers, and then she blossoms. She can talk with authority about last night’s episode, and speculate whether Thabo is going to break up with Mary. She comes into her own. She can talk, exercise her personality and her knowledge. What does the soap opera do for her? It gives her esteem; it satisfies her social needs. It enables her to escape every evening from

her mundane life; it gives her hopes, dreams, expectations and aspirations. It satisfies so many needs, and it comes free, apart from the TV licence costs, and the time she must invest into it.

To her, it's magic.

There are many aspects to this view of audiences, and they derive mostly from the Uses and Gratifications Theory (U&G). It's only a theory, but no one argues about it. Just like Maslow. His Hierarchy of Needs has never been subjected to laboratory or scientific scrutiny, but everyone's happy with it.

Part of the U&G theory is that television programmes, and in fact, ALL media, gives us bite-sized knowledge, packaged in our own language, as we understand it, so that it is easy to remember.

Consequently, it is easy to regurgitate the next day, and appear to be knowledgeable. We have something to talk about. We attract attention. We feel good about ourselves – for a change.

Media content is only attractive when it is useful, and it is useful to the individual person consuming that media:

- Social interaction:
 - Something to talk about, especially the next day
- Information
 - Finding out about what's going on around you, especially in your immediate surroundings
 - Getting advice on things you find difficult: cooking, health, DIY
 - Satisfying curiosity and general interest
- Learning;
 - Broadening your outlook, schoolwork, adult education, self-education
 - Developing a sense of security through knowledge
- Personal Identity
 - Finding well-known people who think the way you do, and thereby “prove you right”
 - Finding people to emulate, and learn from their examples
 - Gaining insight into yourself
- Integration and Social Interaction
 - Getting insight into circumstances of others
 - Getting a sense of belonging with others who share your interests
 - Getting a substitute for real-life companionship, especially for the ill and elderly
 - Helping one to connect with family, friends and society
- Entertainment
 - Escaping, or being diverted, from problems
 - Relaxing
 - Filling time
 - Emotional release
 - Sexual arousal

8 Audiences multi-task when they are bored

If a programme is interesting, fascinating and absorbing enough, the viewer does not want to hit social media at the same time.

Audiences only thumb their texts during a show because they have attention to spare.

What is “attention?”

Classic TV used to fight for viewers and ratings. They sold advertising based on ratings, or as we used to describe them, eyeballs on the screen. We didn't care if those eyeballs were asleep or awake. If the eyeballs were there, we sold them to advertisers.

But these days, eyeballs mean nothing. Today's eyeballs have buds stuck in their ears playing music, the sight is focussed on the screen of the phone, or they are talking on the phone, and their attention is focused on what they hear and speak.

There is no such thing as multi-tasking

From scarcity of content to scarcity of attention

- It's too easy to change to another of 100 channels.
- It's just too easy to scroll your mobile screen at the same time.
- We need serious attention, like we get from sports viewers.

In an experiment two groups of 15 drivers each used a high-tech driving simulator at Stanford University Automotive Innovation Facility in the US. Motorists were told to pay attention to GPS instructions and to avoid crashing into any other vehicles or pedestrians.

Members of one group used cellphones while the other group was tested using a hands-free device.

- Of the drivers using their cellphones, only one passed, five failed by driving the wrong way and nine crashed.
- Of the hands-free group, one passed, six failed by driving the wrong way and eight crashed.
- Both hand-held and hands-free devices split the drivers' attention, the experiment found.

This showed that

You can do two things at the same time, but you will do both badly.

We don't want our consumers to use our media badly. We want them to pay attention so that they see and absorb our advertisers' messages.

We want:

- Viewers to watch and listen, to think, to be grabbed by the excitement of our content so that they remember it, and can talk about it tomorrow.
- Viewers to remember it long enough to spread the word and get more viewers next time. If the programme did not touch their emotional buttons, or if they did not pay attention, then they are of no use to advertisers, and are a waste of money.

Do we want our viewers texting, WhatsApping, Tweeting and talking while they're supposed to be watching our advertisers?

Multitasking is seen as a necessity in the modern world. It is revered as the ability to do several things at once – even if it's something as apparently simple as emailing and talking at the same time. It is taken for granted. People go to enormous lengths to share a table at

a coffee bar or a restaurant with other people, and then interact with less conversation, than their interactions on the phone.

But two people who are seriously attracted to one another, do not play with their phones. The interaction between the two across the table is enough to draw all attention from the phone.

That's exactly the attention we want to our content on screens, no matter what kind, when, or where.

And it's not easy. The attention to our content must override all other competing media; it must convert multi-tasking into "uni-tasking".

We know how to do it, and it's no different to the Value Chain we have used for making TV programmes for the last 60 years. We just must target our niche audience with real care, and with more effort than we have ever used before.

In short, we must know our audience better, and the only way to do that is to mix with them personally.

Take a consumer magazine that focusses on one sport, like fishing or cycling. You'll always find that the cycling magazine editor is a cyclist, and the fishing magazine editor is an angler. They know everything about the subject in their magazine, they attend all the vents, they are in personal touch with thousands of the readers. They know what they are doing, and they know what they are talking about.

All producers of all media must be the same. That is, if you want to attract ATTENTION.

9 Audiences do things for their reasons, not yours

How many times do you hear these expressions in meetings regarding channels and their content?

- "I would never watch a programme like that."
- "All the programmes like that have failed in the past".
- "I don't know anyone who would watch that."
- "It's so boring."

These are not arguments. They are opinions. But whose opinions are they? They should hold weight as they are the opinions of people who make programming decisions.

But do they?

Think of a meeting that consists of programming executives expressing their personal tastes, and all eventually believing that their personal attitudes, likes and dislikes are representative of the audience? Why would decisions based on their personal tastes be disastrous?

These people are all above average educated, in fact, usually graduates. They are in above-average income groups, somewhere in middle to high management income groups. They have a limited social circle. They may very well have 300 Facebook friends, but do they, and can they speak on behalf of those 300 "friends"?

The chances are that all of us have only about 10 friends with whom they would confide. You are really only in a position to speak on behalf the feelings of those people, whose feelings you know, because you confide with them. This list of 10 probably includes four people who are close family.

All the rest of the 290 "friends" are mere acquaintances. They do not know our feelings, and we do not know theirs. We are not qualified to speak on their behalf as to what

programmes they may want to see. In fact, we probably don't even know what programmes they view.

Even if we had 1000 Facebook friends, they would never be acceptable as a sample of the population. We attract people who are the same education, the same income level, the same age, and who share the same interests. We do not include in our Facebook friends people we don't like.

It's even more important when it comes to our real life social friends - the ones we choose to socialise with face to face. We would never go out of our way to choose friends who pose a threat to our intellect, knowledge or attitudes.

Since everyone is seeking and selecting people who pose no threat, it must happen that all the people in our social circle will not pose a threat to anyone else. If they did, they would be excluded, or drop out of the circle on their own.

Any statement like "I would never watch that programme", or "None of my friends would like it" is derived from information available from probably no more than 50 people, all of which represent only those people with whom we have close relationships.

These anecdotal, wild, and baseless statements usually become the yardstick by which we make contributions to decision-making.

Why? It's a phenomenon known as the "Availability Heuristic".

Availability heuristic

The availability heuristic is a mental shortcut that people use to make judgments about the probability of events, opinions, or even the assumption of facts, by how easy it is to think of examples.

Schwartz⁵ relates that

"The availability heuristic says that we assume that the more available some piece of information is to memory, the more frequently we must have encountered it in the past."

To put it another way, if the information is easily available, we will use it in preference to information that is hard to get.

Keep informed

There is NO EXCUSE for falling victim to the Availability Heuristic. By following three simple rules, you can make judgements that are both valid and useful:

1. Be aware of you yourself falling into the Availability Heuristic trap.
2. Don't listen to others who use available and subjective data.
3. Keep informed of independent and reliable data.

⁵ Barry Schwartz. The Paradox of Choice. Harper Perennial. 2004