

FIAT/IFTA Media Studies Grant: Inventing the Female Audience Report by Sarah Arnold

Quite obviously, before there was television, there was no such thing as a television audience. The television audience then was not an ontological given, but a socially-constituted and institutionally-produced category. (Ang, 1991: 3)

Ang's reference to the institutional production of the category audience relates both to early television and to new forms of institutional audience knowledge formation through Big Data and the personalised viewing experience. In both cases, the tools used to measure the viewing public, thus shaping them into the 'audience,' are figured as objective and scientific. The audience produced within such research is rendered a quantifiable 'fact.' Whether through surveys, the use of household samples, ratings or the mining of user data, in each case the methods of accounting for the viewing public are considered to be reliable and free from cultural or ideological intervention. However, this scientific objectivity is formed through cultural notions of behaviour, identity and gender. For example, the generation of audience data is often centred on demographic categories and classifications such as sex, class and/or age. This demonstrates the extent to which the public is already defined according to some criteria as opposed to others (such as eye-colour, mode of transportation or personality traits). As Lisa Gitelman suggests, data is never 'raw' or neutral rather it is 'cooked' and always interpreted. (2013: 3) Segmenting the public according to sex already imposes a certain interpretive logic on the data. In addition, the more large-scale and quantitative the measurement used (as in the case of the development of audience research methods and the use of data and algorithms to identify and determine users) the more removed from social reality this institutional 'knowledge' becomes. In other words, in the formation knowledge through the use of the categories of 'audience' or 'user' as well as the classifications of 'male' or 'housewife,' what are lost are the complexities, nuances and personhood of individuals. As Philip M. Napoli notes, "efforts to enhance knowledge, predictability, and control in relation to the audience have, however, been accompanied by the kinds of analytical simplification that have historically been associated with the process of rationalization." (2014: 7) For example, when audience research and measurement begins with the collection of data on women, it already assumes correlations between, and shared characteristics within, this group of the population and, from this, their viewing habits. Although it may seem inevitable that the viewing (and 'using' in the context of online viewing) public might be understood and acted upon in these terms- since sex and gender are among the more fundamental markers of identity in society- this has materialised through decades of refinement of audience research and measurement techniques.

The centrality of sex and gender within audience research has extended into more contemporary systems of institutional knowledge production, specifically in relation to the generation of seemingly infinite data about digital audiences. The capacity to generate such data on the activities and behaviour of online users would seem to preclude the need for distinct classifications such as 'female' or 'male.' There is even less need for a concept of an audience since data collection occurs at the level of the individual. Nonetheless, assumptions about sex and gender are programmed into the algorithms that make sense of and produce supposedly individual user 'profiles.' This, in turn, shapes the very viewing

experiences that users can have. Ultimately, in an age of personalisation, the viewer finds themselves determined by the institutional knowledge developed and formed in the earliest days of television audience research.

There are, of course, differences in the production of knowledge through historical methods of audience measurement and contemporary ones. If the purpose of audience research and measurement was- in the past, at least- to reflect on and learn from the viewing public and to predict possible future viewing behaviour, the turn to Big Data and the use of algorithms aims towards determining future behaviour. For example, we can note from the early years of the development of television audience research that there was a distinct separation of audience research and programme planning and production. In other words, early audience research did not have a direct impact on what was produced and scheduled for the 'audience' as constructed by the audience research department. Between 1936 and 1950 the findings of the BBC television audience research department reports and studies filter through to production departments in a loose and informal manner. Indeed, Silvey had maintained that such a distinction was necessary

From the very beginning of my time with the BBC, I constantly stressed that audience research's function was limited to providing the decision-makers with information upon which they could act- or not act- as seemed to them right. Map-making and navigating were quite different functions. Ours was map-making. (1974: 34)

By the 1950s, in comparison, there is more synthesis between audience research and programme production as evident in the production of viewer reports that were issued to programme makers from 1950s onwards. And, later still, the relationship between the audience measurement, programme planning and production becomes closer but it still not entirely integrated into an overall strategy for acting upon the findings of audience research reports, surveys or viewing reports (for example if viewership of programme X falls below figure Y, then the programme will be cancelled or rescheduled).

In contrast, the measurement of digital audiences has been closely integrated into real-time effective action. As John Cheney-Lippold suggests, "to participate in today's digitally networked world is to produce an impressive amount of data" that "funnels into an expansive nexus of corporate and state databases." (2017: xiii) This data is interpreted by algorithms that make sense of the individual generating the data according to series' of categories and this determines the type of content accessible, and the digital experiences available, to the user. The Netflix viewer, for example, is subjected to algorithms that interpret the viewer's previous digital behaviour in order to predict future behaviour. These algorithms do not stand apart from traditional demographic classifications, rather certain activities and digital interactions are classified as masculine or feminine. Unlike traditional audience measurement, then, contemporary forms of digital measurement have a much more direct impact on the agency of individuals and much more capacity to shape and mould individuals' digital behaviour. But, like traditional audience measurement, the measurement of digital audience is significantly shaped by demographic classifications such as sex. Complex data is simplified through the deployment of demographic classifications like 'woman,' 'female' and so on.

This paper traces the means by which the institutionally-produced category of the female viewer formed in early television audience research at the BBC. The case of television audience research enables us to understand how the classification of the viewing public took root and was increasingly embedded in the institutional logic and practices of the BBC. Audience research formally began at the BBC in 1936 when both radio and television were broadcast. And while radio listener research was quicker to formulate the institutional category of the 'female audience' the case of television is more indicative of how gender discourses of the audience were introduced to, rather than stemmed from, the research undertaken. This is partly because the television audience remained very small until the 1950s and the lack of focus on the development of television (at least in comparison to radio). From the 1930s through to the 1950s, then, it is possible to identify how and where gender becomes integrated into the knowledge production mechanisms of television audience research. Over time, as this knowledge is disseminated to various other planning and production departments, the 'female audience,' 'the female viewer,' 'the housewife' and the 'mother' come to represent what is imagined about and inferred from the viewing public. Early television audience research did not make sense of the audience in gendered terms, even though radio research was doing so. Instead, the measurement of gender was later introduced to television and this knowledge was put to use across the organisation, for example, in the development of women's programmes, the scheduling of these programmes and the partitioning of programmes and audiences along gendered lines. The analysis of the audience research carried out at the BBC reveals that the study of audiences did not 'discover' that viewing habits, tastes and experiences were determined by gender. Rather the classification of gender was entered into the lexicon of audience research reports and, as a consequence, extended into the institution more widely. Systems of classification did not, of course, begin with the BBC and the origins of systems and methods of categorising and classifying populations reveal that they long predated audience measurement. These systems of classification were devised by states, institutions and organisations to manage and control large populations, often in the context of health, employment and urban planning. However, the strategies for measuring audiences deployed within audience measurement elsewhere as well as in the BBC stem from these earlier efforts to manage and control populations. Therefore, this paper begins with a short account of the critical thinking about systems of classification, particularly it pertains to the classification of gender and follows with a historical overview of the institutional investment in audiences and their classification by the BBC. The paper culminates in a reflection on the findings of research on the BBC Written Archives document holdings on BBC audience research, which demonstrate the stages by which the increasing use of systems of classification worked to produce the concept of "the female audience." It analyses the growth of the use of sex categorisation in surveys carried out by the Listener Research (later Audience Research) Department at the BBC and suggests that this resulted in the marginalisation of the female audience to daytime schedules.

A note on the BBC Written Archives

Research for this paper was undertaken at the BBC Written Archives Centre carried out in August 2017. While there are only a limited number of files pertaining to specific early television programmes from 1936-1939 (and, thus, any reference to audiences or viewers in

the file notes and documentation), there are comprehensive files on radio audience research (BBC WAC R9 also contains documents and reports on television) and television audience research (BBC WAC T1). These are an invaluable source for investigating how audience research developed within the BBC as well as the relationship was between the audience research department, headed by Robert Silvey and the various other television departments such as Drama and Talks that engaged (or not) with audience research. Files on Television Publicity (BBC WAC T23/108) and Television Policy (BBC WAC T16) also provide additional information on how early viewers were understood. Indeed, a comparison between references to viewers and audiences within the audience research files and the various other files on early television indicates that there were significant differences between what audiences and viewers meant within the organisation. For those operating within television production, the viewers were a mysterious group who were thought to hold the answers to what good television might be. For those in audience research, viewers were something to demystify and to subject to regimes of knowledge that helped make them manageable.

Systems of Classification

Organising populations according to physical and social characteristics, for example through a census, results in the production of forms of knowledge about the population. As Michel Foucault suggests, the use of classifications brings about modes of understanding, of addressing, articulating and knowing the people and objects categorised (Foucault, 1979). These become 'naturalised' and enter discourse as the means by which populations are defined and imagined. These categories can change over time and are not absolute but they do have material effects on populations and society. New categories may emerge and existing categories may disappear according to the usefulness of them for institutions (for example commercial enterprises, market research, the state). The formalisation of such categorisation has been traced to the nineteenth century when there was a growth of formal, commodified classifications and standards, both scientific and commercial. People classified, measured and standardised just about everything...Government agencies, industrial consortia, and scientific committees created the standards and category systems. So did mail-order firms, machine tool manufacturers, animal breeders, and thousands of other actors. (Bowker & Leigh Star, 2000: 17)

Writing about the "avalanche of numbers" represented by the growth of statistics and population measurement in the 1800s, Ian Hacking notes that "New slots were created in which to fit and enumerate people...Social change creates new categories of people, but the counting is no mere report of developments. It elaborately, often philanthropically, creates new ways for people to be." (2013: 70) In this sense, according to Foucault, "man is only a recent invention" (1979: xxi). In other words, when institutions and states began to manage populations through categorisation, this had correlating effects on that very population, for example, in terms of how sections of the population understood themselves and their roles as members of society, the economy and as individuals. The implementation of the concept of man generates a complex political, ideological and cultural set of practices that relate not only to that section of the population categorised but the entire population too. 'Man' or 'woman' are products of systems of classification that are changeable and subject to different forms of knowledge. For Foucault, these institutional forms of knowledge,

including the methods of classification that separate out objects and people, enact forms of power over the subject. Anne Cronin follows Foucault to suggest that during the nineteenth century, the social world became classified according to a hierarchy of gender.

Gender can... be understood as a classifying matrix that facilitated, amongst other things, an ordering and hierarchizing of the social world. Women were classified and controlled according to their gender, class and race, but those taxonomies also operated as productive mechanisms to order the social field. (2012: 29)

In *History of Sexuality: Volume 1*, Foucault focuses on sex and sexuality in terms of how they were subjected to regimes of truth that delineated between certain practices and activities and then controlled and regulated according to notions of normalcy (1994). Sex and sexuality were subjected to disciplinary power that was dependent upon the formalisations of institutional systems and measurement practices that produced classifications and, based on these classifications, regulations and sets of standards or behavioural norms. For Foucault, this discipline worked firstly to expose and render visible objects and people and, from here, to modify them (2007: 56) This:

disciplinary normalization consists first of all in positing a model, an optimal mode that is constructed in terms of a certain result, and the operation of disciplinary normalization consists in trying to get people, movements, and actions to conform to this model, the normal being precisely that which can conform to this norm, and the abnormal that which is incapable of conforming to the norm. In other words, it is not the normal and the abnormal that is fundamental and primary in disciplinary normalization, it is the norm. (2007: 57)

In terms of sex and gender, populations are made to fit the model of male/female and knowledge is formed about these categories. Populations are then managed and administered via these categorisations. In the context of audience measurement, for example, the model male/female might rationalise audience taste according to the variable male/female only. The resulting knowledge gleaned from data defined by the male/female model is put to work in those industries that use the data. If a different model were used (such as age or geography) this would produce alternative and, perhaps, conflicting accounts of audience taste. The more a particular model is deployed, the more is normalised the system of categorisation. If sex categorisation is continuously present within a given model then the behaviour, tastes, practices and interests of the total population are understood and acted upon in these terms. The subject then comes to understand themselves in these terms since the model is repeatedly presented to them. Equally, institutions come to understand and act upon populations in these terms. This is evident in the numerous official forms, applications and surveys that individuals encounter whereby they are asked to identify and mark themselves as a particular category of person. This reduces a varied and diverse population into a manageable data set that simplifies to the extreme large numbers of people. The less categories there are, the easier it is for those engaged in measurement and classification to put the data to use and the easier it becomes to 'read' and act upon the population. Accuracy is sacrificed for manageability. Each classification within a category- for example 'female' in the sex category- infers a common set of characteristics, experiences, biology and enculturation within that category (McCall, 2008). Quantitative measurement produces, in this sense, less information about more people but masks and de-emphasises anomalous or inconsistent results. This was evident in the way that BBC audience research produced the category of the 'female audience' despite

the fact that the tastes and behaviours of female viewers did not always correlate with the institutionally produced 'female audience.'

History of BBC television audience research

The development of audience research at the BBC was, as Stefan Schwarzkopf notes, undertaken in response to press criticisms that the organisation was not representing the public interest and providing a valued service to its audience. (2013:) During these initial years of the 1930s and early 1940s the infant television 'industry' was more inward looking, working as it was to develop a form of broadcast that might suit the new medium. Where the audience was considered and interacted with it was largely in relation to the viewers' capacity to act as testers of the new medium. Viewer feedback, often in the form of letters, enabled programme makers to adapt or improve their broadcasts and acted as a barometer of viewer taste and interest (Silvey, 1974; Napoli, 2014: 10). As such, early attempts at audience research were less concerned with the profile of viewers and more with the quality of reception of individual programmes and programme formats as well as the general enthusiasm (or lack of) for television among the small audience. The BBC, for example, was keen to encourage viewer feedback. Through the *Radio Times*, the organisation engaged with its audience by responding to and acknowledging the receipt of letters and phone calls, as noted in a January 7 1938 issue of the magazine. Interest in the composition of the audience would only materialise once television was viable as a mass medium and a business. In the pre-war years of the television service, then, any audience research undertaken formally and informally placed emphasis less on who the audience were and more on how the television service was received. Consequently, there is little reference to women as a category, market or social class of viewer in these early years. If daytime talks were popular in the afternoon, this was not immediately correlated with the 'housewife.'

When television broadcasters began to formalise audience measurement in the post-war years women emerged as a distinct group within the general audience. The significance of the sex composition of the audience was 'realised' and this determined what sense was made of the viewing public. This had the effect of isolating the female audience from the general audience. In other words, where programmes were viewed equally among men and women, these programmes were understood in terms of genre. Where programmes were preferred by more women than men, these became women's programmes. Equally, when men and women watched at the same time, schedules contained programmes that were of interest to the general audience. However, when women watched at certain times more than men, this schedule became to be dominated by women's programmes. While these might seem logical, it had the effect of partitioning women's programmes from the broader schedule. It also produced a narrow understanding of the female audience, one which was interpreted as domestic and maternal. Many women did not fit this category. Ultimately, the female audience and the female viewer represented an institutionalised form of knowledge about how the viewing public was composed. And this had implications for what television would become including how it was scheduled, what types of programme and commercial content was broadcast and how the public was addressed.

Pre-war television: Who is watching?

The BBC television service began experimental broadcasts in 1936 through to 1939 with the service suspended at this time due to the war. During this time any interest in, and reference to, the television viewing public was largely related to viewer responses to the quality of production. At this early stage of the television service, so little was known about the viewing public that there was little interest in segmenting an already small audience into categories such as male and female. Because there were so few viewers and so little known about them 'as an audience' the BBC concerned itself more with the improvement of the technical operations of television broadcast and the development of television programmes. As the television service developed, there was some concern about how the audience would respond to television and television was imagined as in service to the public and, indeed, at the mercy of the public's tastes. It must be remembered that, at this time, this viewing public was very limited in numbers, with approximately 100 households owning sets (Stanton, 2012: 363). Despite this the BBC was concerned with the audience as it was eager to encourage more television sales and to develop the service according to the needs and interests of the viewing public. A January 1935 report from the Postmaster General, for example, refers to television being "put to the acid test of public opinion."¹ In an August 1936 report of the television service, the importance of the public's reaction to television is of utmost importance and the report suggests that the public will ultimately shape what television becomes. In a section on the reaction of the viewing public, it is noted that

This is going to be extremely difficult to determine at first because we have to separate the interest due to novelty from that arising from genuine entertainment. It may be found that methods which have been laid down for ordinary broadcasting may be completely unsuitable.²

Here, the public are invested with a certain amount of power and it is implied that the public response to television will guide programme production. The comment also suggests a sense of powerlessness on the part of the BBC due to its lack of knowledge about its audience.

This concern with the opinion of the viewers resulted in one of the first efforts to carry out audience research on the attitudes towards and responses to television. In December 1936 the BBC put out a call to its small viewing public to engage them in a survey about its programmes. It received 74 completed responses from the viewing public, although this was largely composed of those who were already involved in broadcasting.³ Although carried out within the newly formed Listener Research Department, the study was more a survey of television in the public than who the television public were. For example, the objectives of the study were listed as

1. To find out how many private viewing sets were in the hands of the public
2. To find out under what conditions the television programmes were being received.
3. To find out viewers' opinions on the television programmes.
4. To find out the number of places where the television sets were installed for the purposes of demonstrating the service to the general public.⁴

The report did not ask specific questions about individual programmes but it did allow space for comments and this was exploited by many of the respondents. Because the comments

were quite broad ranging, it was difficult for those interpreting it to produce any meaningful conclusions about it and the report notes that this had its disadvantages as a method of obtaining clear guidance about the views of the television programmes.” Later research efforts would become more quantitative in order to manage the data. In the interpretation of the programme opinions, no reference is made to categories of viewers. Instead responses to programmes are quantified in terms of how comments related to certain genres and how many were favourable. This was accompanied by some summarisation of general views about the programmes. Of particular note was the viewer feedback on Studio Demonstrations and Talks which, the report indicates were largely unfavourable. Especially unpopular were those shows which could be assumed to be- but not yet identified as- ‘women’s programmes.’

Disapproval concentrated largely upon demonstrations of cooking, washing, ironing, etc., which were condemned as of little interest to those who could afford television sets. It was pointed out that fashion parades were of little use in view of the absence of colour.⁵

This was indicative of the lack of understanding television makers had about their audience and perhaps justified later efforts to start to categorise and classify viewers according to gender, social class and age. If television makers had developed domestic demonstration programmes with the idea that this would inevitably appeal to female viewers, this report revealed that those female viewers needed to be understood in relation to other classifications.

This effort to understand the audience continued further in 1939 with a number of ad hoc measures to develop an understanding of the television audience. By this time, the Listener Research Department was already established and, although not a priority, some research was carried out on television. At the same time the BBC held a television conference which invited 150 television viewers to ask questions of the Director of Television Gerald Cock. The two very different approaches to understanding the viewing public offer a good means of representing how and why formal audience research became the dominant means of developing knowledge of the viewing model. The television conference was more an enquiry of television by the public, where the Television Enquiry carried out by the Listener Research Department was a study of the viewers for the television service.

The television conference was held in June 1939, after the Television Enquiry interim report had been published, however it represents some of the earlier ways that the viewing public were understood (or not understood, as the case may be). The purpose of the conference was to inform television viewers of how television was developing and to enable them to ask questions of the television staff about plans for the service. Viewers were also able to make suggestions about what they expected of television. Both men and women participated and raised questions and offered feedback on the variety of programmes, the quality of television and the problems with broadcasts. While the intention of the conference was perhaps to showcase and promote the television service, the transcription of the conference suggests that it was a troublesome affair.⁶ Cock was quite defensive and dismissive when asked about the expansion of the service and the possibility of more programmes. In one exchange with a woman, who suggested the production of a Children’s Hour he agreed that this would be a valuable addition to the service but stated that it was not within the television department’s means to guarantee that this would happen. In fact,

following the conference Cock wrote that future conferences should ban speeches from viewers and lamented that viewers had wrote to him to complain about his responses. Such an experience perhaps made those involved in the production of television more cautious about directly engaging with audiences and it is therefore no surprise that further assessments of audiences took place within the separate department of audience research.

The Television Enquiry of the same year, on the other hand, shifts focus from individual viewers to the viewing public and it is possible to see the formation of the 'television audience' in the earliest television surveys carried out. Using a sample of nearly 1,200, the survey asked respondents a series of questions about what kind of sets they owned, their programme preference as well as more specific questions about viewing habits. In comparison to later television surveys in 1948 and 1951 this is less concerned with the developing knowledge of the composition of the audience and more interested in understanding general engagement in the service. While gender remains absent as a category of the viewing public, methods of quantification and segmentation are deployed. The interim report of 4th April 1939 introduces the research method and findings and uses the concept of the total audience as a means of producing knowledge about the viewing public.⁷ In other words, percentages of the total audience become important ways of understanding audience behaviour. For example, in asking how many people watch television or how many prefer the use of intervals, the audience is classified in terms of simplified responses (yes/no). Unlike the television conference, little opportunity is given for viewers to account for or contextualise these responses. This represents one of the initial efforts to 'produce' the audience and to turn it into something far more manageable than the unruly viewers that participated in the television conference.

By the time the enquiry is completed and published in June 1939, classifications have entered into the system of measurement.⁸ For example, the 865 respondents are classified according to occupation, with a list of trades and professions detailed in the hand-written appendix. The appendix introduces reference to sex here too, with a note that housewives form 2% of the audience (although this noted as for business rather than for entertainment). The report is also concerned with the social class of television viewers and notes that television set ownership is not exclusively for the well-off but that "if the group is a fair sample, the audience is still predominantly "middle class"." However, while this data is collected, no correlation is made between occupation or social class and the responses to questions about viewing habits. Instead it lists general preferences of the total audience. What is of particular note in the report is the extent to which responses that would, in later years, be understood and accounted for in terms of gender, are here accounted for as representative of the total population. For example, among the main preferences for programme type, the following are listed: "O.B.'s of Plays (or Variety) from Theatres; News Reels; "Picture Page"; Light Entertainment (Cabaret, Variety, etc.); O.B.'s of Sporting Events; O.B.'s of other outside events." In the reports of 1948 and 1951 these are clearly accounted for in terms of male and female preference. However, here they are classified only in terms of general popularity. Equally, reference to viewer requests that "demonstrations of cooking and fashions should be included in the afternoon and not in the evening programme" do not align this with assumptions about the gender of the respondents. Where gender is raised it is in terms of the preference for male or female announcers rather than preferences of male or female viewers.

While it might be assumed that BBC audience research was rudimentary at this time, it is worth noting the extensive use of categorisation and classification in BBC listener research during the same period. In a number of listener reports between 1937 and 1942, there was intensive focus on the sex of the audience and the influence this was thought to have on viewing times and viewing preferences. The 1937 Variety Listening Barometer, for example, refers often when women watch and how this influences the programmes' listening figures. It also refers to the common perception that women listen mostly during the daytime.⁹ A later report in 1939 suggests "naturally, since more women are at home than men, afternoon audiences are predominantly feminine."¹⁰ The Variety Listening Barometer of the same year notes that the "size of the feminine audience for daytime programmes is of special interest."¹¹ A September report on Winter Listening Habits produces much more data on the audience share by gender and correlates this with the programme preference and timing of programmes.¹² By 1942, the Listener Research Department had established specific audience panels including a Women's Panel. A report on daytime programme repeats of this year asks this panel, rather than ones composed of general audiences, about preferences for these programmes.¹³

There are obvious reasons for the differences in the audience research of radio and television listeners. Radio broadcasting had been established for a number of years by the time that audience research formally commenced and had listeners in their millions. It also had a fairly standardised schedule of broadcast and a consistent output of programme formats and genres. By comparison, television had a miniscule audience, a fairly sporadic schedule of programmes and, at this stage, an uncertain future. In other words, radio production and broadcast had become standardised and, with this, the audience had equally become standardised. The radio audience was, thus, reduced to types and categories and this enabled more large-scale surveying of general trends and habits. This resulted in generalisations about audiences, nowhere more apparent in the oft-repeated 'fact' that women watched more during the daytime. This assertion became common-sense and resulted in programme planning that ghettoised women and women's programmes to this period of the day, despite the equally large female audience that listened at other times of the day. Television was yet to shape its audience and its programme schedule in this way. It was concerned with 'everybody' and what this 'everybody' preferred, watched and was concerned with. Although more rudimentary in its surveys, this was also more egalitarian, although it is possible to see how concerns with social composition were beginning to make their way into surveys. In the early years of television, then, the viewing public were a spontaneous, impulsive, changeable group that collectively expressed opinions and attitudes towards the television service and its programmes. Programme-makers were subject to the tastes, interests and behaviour of the audience and women had an equal stake as members of this viewing public. If, for example, a high percentage of the total audience favoured magazine programmes, this was not interpreted through the lens of sex rather it was significant in and of itself. As outlined further on, the more sex categorisation became a norm within audience measurement, the more this had implications for what types of audiences were valued or not.

Post-war television: this is who is watching

The return of television in the post-war years was met with an increasing interest in the wider BBC for formal audience measurement. The Listener Research Department and the Television Service worked hard to make the case for any form of television audience research. The Head of the Television Service, Maurice Gorham made a number of requests for a “television equivalent of the Daily Listening Barometer”¹⁴ and indicated that he would assist in the generation of a representative panel. Although Gorham and Robert Silvey communicated about the possibility for television audience research, this was initially rejected by the Director General. Gorham’s persistence in pursuing this matter suggests the level of urgency felt within the Television Service for the need for an understanding of the television audience. Gorham implored the Director General to change his mind and suggested that it was difficult for the television department to plan productions without knowing what the audience was interested in.¹⁵ In a letter to the Senior Controller, he noted that viewer letters had decreased and asked if he could include a closing announcement in a television programme to solicit feedback from viewers about their opinions on programmes.¹⁶ In a memo to the editor of the Radio Times, he went so far as to ask whether it would be possible to have viewers publish their ratings in the magazine.¹⁷ Similarly, Silvey began developing plans for television sample panels and worked on preliminary questionnaires for participants.¹⁸ He compiled a draft letter to potential respondents which began “we want to know as much as possible about our audience.” This knowledge would be gleaned from responses to questions about the make-up of the household as well as their age and sex.¹⁹ Unlike the earlier television surveys, newer surveys would concentrate much more on classifying the viewing public. By 1948 the Director General was finally confident enough in the future of television to permit a television audience survey and a number of initiatives were undertaken to survey interest in programmes and to survey the audience.²⁰

The Listener Research Department undertook a number of reports on weekly viewing (Television: The “Viewers’ Vote” Scheme) and the composition and viewing behaviour of the audience (Television: Some Points about the Audience).²¹ The latter demonstrates a far more determined effort to produce a quantifiable and understandable audience where viewing activity could be read in terms of and in relation to social classification. Respondents were asked to identify “how many men, women and children usually watched television when the set was in use.” The use of male and female categories is foregrounded in this report and it is clear to see that the gender segmentation is productive of different meanings about and interpretations of the audience. The sex of the audience is particularly important in the reporting on viewing times and frequency among the audience. The Frequency of Viewing table, for example, highlights the differences in numbers of men and women watching at particular times during the day and across the week. The splitting of male and female viewers introduces a new interpretive logic to audience measurement whereby different sense will be made on some members of the audience in comparison to others. This is nowhere more evident in the data that suggests that weekday afternoon viewing was undertaken by 1.4 women in comparison to .4 men. In other words, daytime viewing becomes understood as a predominantly female activity. This results in the daytime audience been understood almost exclusively as the ‘female audience’ despite there being a significant number of male viewers watching at this time. In addition, while the number of women watching television during the daytime appears large comparative to men, it is

largely in keeping with general trends across the week. The table, thus, gives the impression that women are mainly daytime viewers when, in fact, women watch in fairly consistent numbers throughout the week. Further points the report suggests that the 'female audience' defined within it might not be representative of the female population it aims at representing. It notes that the viewer comments from the survey suggest an audience that is suburban, middle class and middle aged. However, it does not associate this with the impact on viewing numbers and viewing times, for example, in terms of how middle class and middle aged women may be more likely to be viewing during the daytime than the wider female population. Essentially, the process of quantification erased any differences among groups of female viewers and produced a manageable, numerical object called the 'female audience.' This macro-level view of the audience was quite different to another report by Mass-Observation published in the same year. In comparison to the Listener Research Report, Mass-Observation's Report on Television emphasised the diversity amongst women television viewers as well as the similarities across social classifications. For example, it found that some housewives thought television a waste of time, where others found it a valuable educational resource. This focus on the full and complex spectrum of experiences was very different to the reports produced within BBC Listener Research, which imposed order and consistency on audiences and worked to produce knowledge about and meaning from viewer experience.

By the 1950s, the notion that social classifications influenced television viewing behaviour had become embedded in the BBC. Audience research continued to segment the viewing public by gender and to draw assumptions about viewing pattern based on this category. Viewing Panels were established and viewers issued with log books which asked them to identify their sex and age alongside their reactions to particular programmes.²² In his publication 'Methods of Viewer Research Employed by the British Broadcasting Corporation' Silvey maintained that social classifications such as sex and age were "all factors with which programme tastes are liable to be associated."²³ Although he conceded that there was "no invariable pattern" and that "the tastes of men and women are frequently similar and frequently dissimilar" he nonetheless insisted upon the use of classification in determining some "basic facts" about the audience. As the 'female audience' became a discursive object within the BBC and this was largely correlated with viewing time, attention to this audience shifted towards daytime viewing and programme policy was to address this female daytime audience by scheduling 'women's programmes' during this time. This was despite the findings that "women do not want special women's programmes every afternoon."²⁴ Thus, while audience research was productive of institutional knowledge of the female audience, it continuously had to contend with anomalous and inconsistent behaviour of this viewing category. Research on weekday afternoon viewing, for example noted that:

For the various women's programmes an average of 15% of sets are in use but...there are wide variations. An occasional 'Designed for Women' has touched 29% while one 'Health in the Home' was as low as 5%. The "viewers per set-in-use" figure is always lower for these programmes, for the obvious reason that they are directed at women who only constitute part of the public (albeit the major part in the afternoon).²⁵

In other words, even when the use of the category 'female audience' did little to shed light on viewing patterns and viewer taste, the BBC Audience Research Department continued to deploy it as meaningful category.

Conclusion

The case study of the introduction of sex classification in BBC audience research demonstrates the processes by which audiences came to be produced and managed by media institutions. The 'female audience,' in other words, was not a material fact, instead it was a discursive object used within audience research to make sense of the viewing public. Indeed, during the early years of television, there was no 'female audience' but many female viewers. The creation of the 'audience' enabled the BBC to gain a sense of power in relation to what was once considered a mysterious viewing public. The creation of the 'female audience' allowed the organisation to map social inequalities onto programme policy with the result that the female viewer came to occupy as much a marginalised position in relation to the television service as she did in the social sphere. This was done firstly through the collapsing of vast numbers of culturally, geographically and socio-economically different individuals into one category- woman- and, secondly, by developing a programme and schedule strategy that segregated the 'female audience,' moving it to daytime schedules that would not interfere with the general audience. Ultimately, the use of sex classification within audience research resulted in the ghettoization of female viewers to specific time slots and specific genres. While female viewers, of course, were free to undertake whatever viewing they wished, the institutional production of a 'female audience' meant that women were addressed in sex-specific terms.

This may seem distant from contemporary digital measurement practices, yet the legacy of the television audience research on the sex-composition of audiences has had very real impacts on newer forms of institutional knowledge production on audiences so much so that sex classification plays a central role in how vast numbers of users are understood, analysed and acted upon. Search engines, social media and online viewing platforms all depend upon the use of algorithms that classify digital behaviour according to a range of classifications including sex. Video streaming site algorithms, for example, may aim to determine the user's sex in order to personalise the user's experience. A user who watches a cookery programme may be determined as female and a person who watches a police drama may be determined as male. The recommendations that follow from this will be based on the determined sex of the user. This results in a narrowing down of the range of content the user can easily access. This represents a sophisticated refinement rather than a move away from the methods and tendencies of audience research as it developed in the early years of television.

This paper's focus on the production of the 'female audience' within early BBC audience research shows that it was not 'natural' or inevitable that the viewing public would be defined and acted upon according to sex classifications. Neither was it inevitable that the sex of the viewing public would play so central a role in shaping the programmes and schedules of the television service. However, the methods deployed in measuring the audience resulted in this and an investigation of them reveals the mechanisms by which the viewing public came to be understood as an audience. The BBC Written Archives helps shed light on the means by which this materialised and is a valuable source in tracing the ways in which gender materialised and materialises in screen industries. The history of BBC

audience research offers a useful foundation for understanding how, why and where gender is structured and shaped within contemporary screen experiences.

Details of Materials used

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- BBC WAC: T16: 1928- 81- Papers and correspondence of the Television Policy department
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- BBC WAC T1/11 LR/75- TV Audience Research File: Television Enquiry 1939 (papers and correspondence)
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² BBC WAC T23/108 Television Publicity Report on the Television Service from the Alexandra Palace by Controller (Engineer) 10th August 1936

³ BBC WAC T1/6/1 TV Audience Research Viewers and the Television Service: a report of an investigation of viewers' opinions in January 1937, 5th February 1937

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- ⁴ BBC WAC T1/6/1 TV Audience Research Viewers and the Television Service: a report of an investigation of viewers' opinions in January 1937, 5th February 1937
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- ⁶ BBC WAC R9/9/6 Television Conference: Viewers' Questions Monday 26th June 1939
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- ¹⁴ BBC WAC R9/21 Memo from Maurice Gorham to Robert Silvey 29th January 1946
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- ²⁰ BBC WAC T1/6/2 Audience Research Memos: Director of Administration (Bottomley) writes to the Silvey 6th July 1948
- ²¹ BBC WAC T1/6/2 Audience Research Memos: A Listener Research Report- Television: Some Points about the Audience 1948
- ²² BBC WAC R9/21 BBC Television Panel Log for Week 3 sample log for viewing week Sunday 15th January 1950
- ²³ BBC WAC R9/21 Methods of Viewer Research Employed by the British Broadcasting Corporation by Robert Silvey 13th December 1950
- ²⁴ BBC WAC R9/21 Silvey memo on report on women's and children's programmes 22nd March 1950
- ²⁵ BBC WAC R9/21 Memo from Silvey to Controller of Television Programmes 27th November 1950