

## Plenary 1

Thursday 11 September h. 9:30-10:30, Auditorium

### Researching audiences for subtitled media in the UK

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We study media audiences to understand what media people watch, when, why and how, and to understand how media mediate people's understanding of contents, events and narratives. We study the audiences for subtitled media because subtitles mediate, and therefore potentially inflect the reception of the original media.

But subtitles are not just a conduit to media to which we might otherwise have no access. Subtitled media may also have its own cultural 'centre of gravity'. British audiences have historically had limited access to subtitled media, which needed to be accessed via specialized cinemas and at odd times of the night on broadcast television. As a result, subtitled media has become its own genre in the UK and other anglophone countries. A recent project on UK film audiences identified five genres preferred by UK audiences; one of these was "arthouse and foreign language film" (Merrington et al. 2019: 122). These do not only include 'art' films but also mainstream releases from other countries which just happen to be subtitled for their UK release.

This paper discusses what it means to research the reception of subtitled media in anglophone countries, including the specific features of the UK media landscape which shape research, the changing profile of subtitle users, the changes in subtitling norms, and the impact of rapid recent changes in research methods. Users of subtitled media in the UK used to be restricted to d/Deaf and hard of hearing viewers and the largely middle-class, urban audiences who watched subtitled films in the cinema. Now, due to evolving broadcast legislation and the rise of streaming media, subtitles are available on most media and data suggests that they are increasingly a default option for viewers, particularly younger viewers (Yougov, 2023). This is not only the case in the UK, but also in the US (Ballard, 2023). Subtitles are used for a wider range of purposes, including to help concentration and to enhance the viewing experience, and by groups of people who have not been previously considered in research, such as neurodivergent viewers.

Subtitling norms are also changing. Previously, subtitles were more or less condensed to make them cognitively easier to process, but recent research suggests that UK viewers, at least, are heavily in favour of subtitles which are as verbatim as possible. Netflix, one of the major vectors for subtitled media in the UK, has made line lengths longer, frame gaps shorter and reading speeds faster.

This suggests that we need to look again at what viewers actually want. Recent years have seen a rapid rise in experimental methods for researching subtitling reception, particularly using eyetrackers. This research has been enormously important, but my paper will argue that we also need to consider subtitling reception research more holistically, and in relation to audiences as well as individual research participants. This move towards the social is influenced by scholars such as Elena di Giovanni and Chiara Bucaria. I propose questions such as: how do audiences for subtitled media form and evolve in the anglosphere? What aspects of subtitled media are important to these audiences, and how? What is at stake for audiences in watching subtitled media? How is the cultural value of subtitled media articulated, by whom? To use Kirsty Sedgman's words, I seek to understand audiences for subtitled media in "the messy, situated reality of diverse spectatorial engagement" (2019: 170).

### References

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