

## Media methods research: Finding audiences and giving a voice to mothers

Film, media and television studies have, since their emergence, relied on a diverse range of research theories, methods, practices and approaches in order to examine what is deemed important, significant and of interest to both the academic community and the wider society. Textual, discourse and content analysis, focus groups, interviews and questionnaires are but a few of the qualitative and quantitative techniques used to explore the popular media environment. Each method has its own unique structures and stages of research, its own strengths and limitations, and the use of a particular approach depends on the aims and objectives of specific research projects. While some projects demand breadth and scale, others are committed to the minutia of a particular area; while some seek to offer informed debate as part of a theoretically rigorous desk-bound study, others prefer to position audience voices at the forefront of their research.

In order to understand and give voice to women about their responses to representations of motherhood on television, it is important that we understand the ways in which questionnaires, interviews, oral histories, netnographies and focus groups have been and should be employed by the researcher. It is not my intention to look in detail at the pros and cons of each available media method – indeed, there are a myriad of successful volumes dedicated to that particular topic (Priest 2010; Berger 2013) – rather, this chapter will give a brief overview of existing ethnographic studies that present women's responses to gendered media genres, namely, harlequin romances, celebrity gossip magazines, female film stardom and soap opera, before outlining the ways in which I looked to find suitable participants, listen to their voices and present their views as they relate to maternal depictions on the small screen.

I have previously examined representations of motherhood on popular television and considered the ways in which such depictions inform the 'good' mother myth in an age of intensive mothering and the professionalism of motherwork, paying particular attention to the ways in which maternal images *might* be seen and understood by the mother in the audience (Feasey 2011, 2012a, 2013). Although this work was crucial in presenting the relationship between media and motherhood studies and in foregrounding historic and more contemporary representations of motherhood in the entertainment area in relation to the changing social, sexual and political context, what was missing here of course was the voice of the audience. My research within the field of feminist television studies was not unique in this regard; indeed, much seminal work points to a hypothetical viewer and an imagined spectator rather than giving voice to those in the audience (Dow 1996; Haralovich 1999; Brunson 2000; Brunson and Spigel 2007; Lotz 2014). This textual research is crucial within and beyond the field as it allows us to understand and reflect upon those gendered images that both saturate the media environment and inform our common sense notions of appropriate, inappropriate, credible and devalued sex and gender roles within the contemporary period. One might hope that such literature plays a role in the ways in which future representations of gender inform the entertainment marketplace within and beyond the public service remit and speak to the importance of such roles and representations for a range of social and identity programmes.

Acknowledging and unmasking existing, new and forthcoming representations of gender is crucial within academia, and yet, the near universalism of textual analysis has resulted in theorists overlooking the role of the audience and the significance of their voice as it either chimes with or challenges extant literature within and beyond feminist media and motherhood studies.

## Audience and reception studies

That said, there is a small number of theorists who have, since the emergence of feminist media studies sought to redress the balance, and put audiences front and centre of their research, drawing on a range of questionnaires, interviews, focus groups and surveys. This work has to be applauded for its contribution to the fields of gender, media, sociology and motherhood studies because, ‘critical readings of “texts” mean nothing without at least some attempt at ethnography – how people actually watch TV, for example’ (Wolff 1993).

Janice Radway’s seminal *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature* (1984/1991) was groundbreaking for its ethnographic study of a group of longstanding female romance novel readers in a Midwestern American city. At a time when much feminist theory derided popular romances for their patriarchal narratives of male domination and female submission, Radway looked to challenge such research by considering the ways in which readers made sense of and found pleasure within these seemingly ephemeral volumes. Radway combined reader-response criticism with anthropology and feminist psychology, in order to discover why romance readers remained loyal to their chosen genre texts. She asked readers to explore their own reading practices rather than to make assumptions on their behalf. Radway discovered that these women devoted endless time to their families, yet received little attention in return. From this perspective then, these women looked to romance fiction as an escape from their mundane domestic routines, focusing on a caring and tender hero who provided the much-needed attention that they felt was missing from their lived reality. By speaking to the readers themselves, Radway discovered that romance readers were not, as previously assumed, passive recipients of fairy-tale narratives, but rather, frustrated wives and mothers who admired strong, resilient and intelligent heroines, heroines who defied the expected stereotype of the genre. Through focus group debate and continued discussion with these women, Radway came to understand how these readers turned to these ostensibly patriarchal texts at times of

resentment at their own limited life choices. Radway spoke throughout this work about the need to shift our attentions away from text-based analysis whereby the scholar offers theories concerning general reading practices, to what she referred to as 'the complex social event of reading', looking beyond the text itself to a greater understanding of the complex relationship between text, culture and reader (Radway 1984/1991).

A decade after the publication of Radway's important volume, Joke Hermes looked to examine the ways in which magazine readers made sense of gendered publications by conducting extensive interviews with readers. In *Reading Women's Magazines: An Analysis of Everyday Media Use* (1995) Hermes employed reception analysis in order to explore the ways in which women used such ephemeral texts in their daily routines. While extant literature on the women's magazine sector tended to show concern for passive female readers in opposition to the privileged feminist author, Hermes was keen to show that readers were not as earlier research had suggested, cultural dupes or silly housewives. Hermes took respect for these women as her starting point, emphasising their agency rather than dependency on gendered magazines. And although one might suggest that the reader response findings appeared banal, this was precisely the point of the research. Hermes was not seeking to reclaim these magazines or to theorise readership responses, but rather, to understand the role of these texts in the lives of the reader. This research suggested that women's magazines were a valuable and unique genre due in part to the fact that they allowed women to forge imagined communities with one another and, rather controversially, to 'inoculate' readers against lived events that they might encounter in their own lives.

However, beyond this, Hermes found that readers had little interest or investment in the content of these texts, but rather, that they valued them for their ability to fill small gaps of time in their daily routines. Although women's magazines do on occasion and for a fleeting period afford women a symbolic space within which to imagine their 'perfect selves' this was not why they continued to look at these texts. Indeed, it was clear that very few women were able to recall a single article, feature or theme from their recent reading encounters. Hermes was not defensive about her decision to base her research exclusively on readers' perceptions of women's magazines,

nor did she feel the need to reintroduce the voice of the 'exceptionally knowledgeable' reader. Rather, when she discovered the limited meaning that these texts had in the lives of the reader, she continued to remind us of the importance of reader responses over textual approaches, irrespective of, or precisely because of, the ostensibly trivial commentary unearthed in her research. After all, text-based research perpetuates the 'fallacy of meaningfulness' as this approach gives voice to academic interpretations, interpretative repertoires and theoretical considerations in a way that has little in common with the average, mundane, normal or 'ordinary' reader (Hermes 1995).

On the back of existing literature concerning the ways in which female readers responded to a range of romance narratives and the gendered magazine sector, Peter Jackson, Nick Stevenson and Kate Brooks combined interviews with editors and key production staff, content analysis and focus group discussions in order to locate the appeal of men's lifestyle magazines. The volume, *Making Sense of Men's Magazines* (2001), hoped to examine the ways in which these texts played a role in the social construction of contemporary masculinity for young readers. However, what was significant about this volume was not simply the findings offered by the group discussions in relation to notions of capitalism, consumption, masculinity and gender politics, but also, and perhaps, more importantly, their candid assessment as to the reality of doing ethnographic research. These authors sought to speak to readers in line with Radway and Hermes before them, trying to discover the pleasures and frustrations on offer in texts such as *FHM* and *Loaded* against notions of irony and retro-sexism that underpinned textual considerations of such work, but they struggled to locate willing participants.

These researchers looked to secure focus group discussions in Sheffield and London, seeking to recruit readers and non-readers from a wide range of age, employment and educational backgrounds. The book tells us that after distributing 200 flyers in their chosen locations, 11 individuals suggested that they would be available for a focus group. However, two of these were clearly 'joke' submissions, with only one person arriving for the discussion. The notion of a focus group soon turned into an interview situation, at which point the tape-recorder microphone stopped working, leaving no

meaningful or lasting record of any audience research having taken place. Jackson, Stevenson and Brooks did eventually find relevant participants after using the snowball technique whereby researchers looked to friends, family and their wider social and professional networks to secure respondents for their project. The authors proposed that the men's lifestyle magazine market should be understood as a cultural response to social change, rather than as a backlash to feminism or escapist fun, and yet, irrespective of the fascinating findings of the research, this work was valuable for its candid presentation of the problems of reception studies in terms of finding willing and relevant participants and then getting them to commit time and energy in the shape of focus group sessions. The authors were frank about the difficulty of finding the appropriate facilitator for this gendered project, and the challenge of encouraging and maintaining group interaction across social and economic demographics (Jackson *et al.* 2001).

The return to the reader, or reception studies, was also evident beyond those interested in print media. After all, at a time when Radway was interviewing romance readers in order to better understand their reading habits, Ien Ang was looking to examine the ways in which Dutch viewers responded to the American prime time television soap opera, *Dallas* (1978–91). The findings of this research informed the slight but significant volume, *Het Geval Dallas* (1982), or, as it is known in English translation, *Watching Dallas: Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination* (1985). Like Radway before her, Ang was not focused on academic readings or a theoretical analysis of the American production, but rather, the research for the volume was based on replies to her advertisement in a women's magazine, *Viva*, where she posted a request asking viewers to let her know why they liked or disliked the show in question.

Rather than view audiences as passive recipients of the powerful cultural industries, Ang sought to discover the ways in which international audiences made sense of and found (dis)pleasure in the long-running programme. The research focused on notions of realism, fiction, melodrama and feminism as they were highlighted in the letters written, embracing the complexity of readers' responses to the show in question. Responses came from loyal fans of the show, those who claimed that the programme was trash (even as they admitted to watching), and those again who mentioned

that they barely watched television (even though their commentaries suggested otherwise). However, irrespective of how these audiences positioned themselves in relation to television in general and *Dallas* in particular, Ang was interested in trying to understand what pleasures were on offer in the popular text.

While some respondents disliked the show for its low-brow soap status, for exploiting the most base common denominators of taste and distinction, others resisted or negotiated the ideology of mass culture by way of an 'ironic' mode of viewing; others sought to defend themselves from the ideology of the text while others again appeared unaware of any ideological structures present. The letters revealed a variety of responses to the ideology of mass culture that informed the programme; so too, they revealed differences in terms of debates over realism and identification. Respondents suggested that the pleasure of watching *Dallas* came from recognition, from being able to identify with and relate to the characters, locations and scenarios; however, there was no single agreed or monolithic definition of what was 'realistic' in these accounts. While many did not perceive *Dallas* as realistic on a simple denotative level, some acknowledged that the family structure, importance of home and broader relationships could be read as entirely recognisable, if not realistic (Ang 1985).

In *Women Watching Television: Gender, Class and Generation in the American Television Experience* (1991), Andrea Press looked at the history of women on television, considering a myriad of representational roles in relation to notions of class, generation and gender, distinguishing between pre-feminist, feminist and postfeminist images on primetime. Press made the point that postfeminist programming continued to present the traditional nuclear family unit as the ideal for contemporary women to aspire to. Press outlined this textual history and an overview of extant television representations before presenting the findings of her own empirical investigation, based on extensive interviews with working and middle class women. This research emerged out of Press' concern that the media in general, and television in particular, influenced women's identities in their wider cultural environment. We were told that 'it becomes more and more pressing to ask how women in our time use the images and ideas our culture makes available to them as they construct their own identities in

the world and as they form their own ideas about what is normal and real outside of themselves' (Press 1991). In short, how had women's lives and thoughts been influenced by those depictions of feminism, femininity and the woman's role as it was presented on the small screen.

Press conducted open-ended interviews with working and middle-class female viewers in the San Francisco Bay area in order to examine the ways in which women identified with the gendered images seen on television, paying particular attention to notions of reality and the question of what viewers accepted as realistic in relation to their wider social experiences. We were told that working class viewers are more committed to realism while their middle class counterparts presented a distanced, even ironic, stance when speaking about their television viewing practices and preferences. Press suggested that although middle class viewers were less interested in television than the working class cohort, they ultimately identified more strongly with television characters than the working class audience. Press accounts for this class-based reading by foregrounding the historic middle class bias of much television programming. In short, middle class audiences were said to be able to identify with privileged characters on screen while working class audiences were found to feel alienated by such middle class realism. Press' overarching contribution here was to note that while working class viewers watch television through the lens of class, the middle classes view through a more gendered lens, contributing therefore to debates within the fields of gender, media and the broader social sciences.

Later that decade, Mary Strom Larson was interested in examining the ways in which adolescent soap opera viewers perceived single motherhood in comparison to those who do not watch such daytime television fare. She began by telling us that television 'is a major source of information about behaviours appropriate to gender' and noted that televisual representations have the power and scope to influence a viewer's perception of social reality. She went on to introduce what she referred to as the 'serious and costly' consequences of single parenthood, pointing out that, at the time of writing, '45% of all female-headed households live in poverty ... and children in single parent households are six times as likely to be poor as those in two parent families.' She continued to cite details concerning emotional and



crime problems, life-long learning disabilities and behavioural problems associated with single parenting (Larson 1996).

On the back of a detailed content analysis of several popular American soap operas it was found that the single mothers depicted in the genre were well educated, in professional, rewarding careers, lived in beautifully furnished homes, wore designer clothing and faced few challenges concerning childcare. Indeed, these women were seen to carry out successful careers, dress impeccably, take time for themselves and still maintain a supporting maternal role. No maternal sacrifices were seen having to be made for children. We are told that the representation of single motherhood in the American daytime soap opera was at odds with the reality of that role, and that it was this disharmony that was of interest to the researcher. Larson wanted to discover if watching these unrealistic depictions of unmarried motherhood on screen influenced understandings about the reality of single parenting in society.

Her findings, based on questionnaires completed by 16- to 18-year-old students, made it clear that those who watched daytime soap operas were ill-informed about the reality of single parenthood, basing their opinions about this parenting status on what were overwhelmingly positive experiences for this family unit in the domestic genre. The young soap opera viewers assumed that single mothers were educated, with good employment prospects and few financial concerns. The optimistic assumptions continued when they noted that they would have healthy babies, an active social life, a beautiful home, designer attire and male friends who helped with childcare. The concern here was that the lived reality of and young people's perceptions of single parenting were at odds. Depictions of single mothers in the popular genre encouraged young women to think that such parenting had desirable consequences while telling young men that fatherhood comes with few responsibilities, which is problematic if one considers the high rates of unexpected teen pregnancy on both sides of the Atlantic. Larson viewed the media as a powerful force in shaping cultural norms and mores, with televisual representations being said to exert a significant influence on how audiences understood their wider social environment (Larson 1996).

Jackie Stacey (1994) echoed the sentiments of the aforementioned theorists as she spoke of the importance of female spectators to the field of

feminist film theory. Since the mid-1970s, feminist film criticism had been committed to the production and reproduction of textual approaches, focusing on both the 'images of women' and the 'woman as image' debate. The former was concerned with stereotypical images of women in Hollywood and the ways in which these restricted definitions of femininity informed a patriarchal culture (Haskell 1974), while the latter looked to discover how the cinematic language of mainstream cinema constructed female stars in a 'to-be-looked-at-ness' role via the mechanism of psychoanalytic theory (Mulvey 1975, 1989). Indeed, due to the near-universalism of the psychoanalytic approach, debates concerning unconscious mechanisms and the male gaze, voyeuristic intent, fetishistic scopophilia and narcissistic ideals continue to dominate this particular field. Although these two modes of study differ in many respects, what they had in common was that they overlooked the ways in which women in the audience made sense of representations of women on screen.

Stacey was a lone voice heard asking how academic understandings of female spectatorship might be transformed by accounts from women in the cinema audience. In the groundbreaking *Star Gazing: Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship* (1994), Stacey informed us that she sought to put 'female spectators back into theories of spectatorship' by combining feminist film theory with a rich body of ethnographic research, a rich body indeed. Stacey's research was informed by letters and questionnaires from regular cinemagoers from the wartime and post-war period, examining the different ways in which women looked at images of femininity on the big screen. Stacey investigated the importance of female stars such as Ginger Rogers, Deborah Kerr and Joan Crawford in women's memories of wartime and post-war Britain, with an emphasis on escapism, identification and consumption, taking the women's voice, as Radway had done a decade earlier, as the cornerstone of the research. When a respondent wrote to Stacey to inform her that: 'I loved the cool charms of stars such as Deborah Kerr ... my childhood dream was to become like her and I used to spend hours shop window gazing and selecting what she would wear' (Stacey 1994), it made it clear that glamorous images of fashionable film stars offered a unique dialogue between the female image and the female spectator in line with an active female gaze, at the time unaccounted for

in the field, an active gaze later explored by Rachel Moseley (2003) in her thought-provoking audience research concerning generational readings of Audrey Hepburn.

More recently, Beverley Skeggs, Janet Thumin and Helen Wood (2008) employed a range of audience approaches in order to examine the ways in which women could be seen to make sense of reality parenting texts such as *Supernanny* (2004–12). This research used the recently developed text-in-action approach which involved the researchers watching a particular title with participants and detailing their responses at the time of viewing, or what might perhaps be understood as the *Gogglebox* (2013–) technique on the back of the success of the Bafta-winning reality show that watches members of the public watching television. The researchers were flexible in terms of their chosen methodologies and agile from the point of view of gathering the most meaningful data from their participants. Indeed, much of the write-up outlined the ways in which the researchers looked to find the most suitable fit between participant and approach. Their multi-layered methodology ‘allowed the production of different types of knowledge relating to forty research participants and their relationship to “reality” television’ (2008), beginning with textual and intertextual analysis in order to select the programme sample, and later, interviews, text-in-action and focus group discussions in order to compare (or otherwise) individual readings of shows such as *Supernanny* with public statements about the genre.

Much like the work of Jackson, Stevenson and Brooks (2001) before it, this research offered a significant contribution to the fields of media studies and the broader social sciences due to its honest, or what Oakley (1979/1981) might refer to as ‘unsanitised’ account of their research process. Skeggs, Thumin and Wood discovered that middle class women were entirely comfortable in their position as interviewee, clearly at ease being questioned by academic researchers in relation to their preferred viewing practices and their consumption of reality texts. These women spoke as equals to the interviewer, they had a shared professional status and were able to talk at length and reflect on their attitudes towards reality programming with a critical distance as is encouraged by academic research.

However, this sense of ease and comfort was not shared by respondents across the differing demographic groups in the sample. Many working class

women offered shorter, blunt answers when questioned about programme choices, with little elaboration or reflection. Even though the working class women watched reality television far more than their middle class counterparts, they were either less willing or less able to express their readings of such shows beyond a text being ‘funny’ for example. There was no commentary as to gender or class depictions, which was clearly a surprise to the researchers in relation to texts such as *Wife Swap* (2004–). After all, even a cursory glance at such shows tell us that taste formations, cultural distinctions and notions of class are paramount to the narrative of these texts. While the middle class participants were able to express and reflect on notions of class and gender in reality television, the working class subjects spoke more stiltedly about immediate pleasures and viewing gratifications with little in the way of contemplation. This unease between subject and interviewer was at its most extreme when the researchers spoke to new migrants. One Pakistani woman with limited knowledge of the English language assumed that the researchers were representatives of the state, going on to offer ‘her bank statement as if to prove her legitimacy’ before trying to provide the ‘correct’ answers about her life in the UK. The data gathered from the middle and working class women were not comparable, and rather than let this compromise the findings of the research, the ‘text-in-action’ approach was used in order to help overcome the uneasy interview situation. In short, the use of these varying methods enabled the researchers to ‘see how class was being performed differently through the three stages of [the] empirical research: interviews, text-in-actions and focus groups’ (Skeggs *et al.* 2008). The point here then was that audience research did not generate natural or neutral responses to set questions or group discussions, but rather, that the method chosen went some way to defining the responses given, ranging from discussions of class capital to specific examples of maternal authority. Skeggs, Thumin and Wood offered a candid account of their research process, foregrounding the importance of specific methods and approaches to particular demographic groups, even before they embarked on the analysis of the data itself.

With this in mind, it is worth noting that film, television and media studies more broadly have witnessed a resurgence in audience and reception

theory in recent years, with research putting a myriad of readers, viewers and spectators at the forefront of their work. Indeed, entire journals have developed on the back of this newfound approach to media research (Barker *et al.* 2014).

## Mothers and motherhood in audience and reception studies

The maternal voice has been encouraged in contemporary research on pregnancy, motherwork and the maternal role, with women relaying pregnancy experiences, child-birthing practices and their inability to find a harmonious balance between their public work and their mothering role. By drawing on a range of questionnaires, semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions we are able to acknowledge women's lived experiences, foregrounding a much-needed voice in the fields of motherhood studies, gender theory and feminist criticism.

Ann Oakley might be understood to have inaugurated this strand of motherhood research in her seminal volume *Becoming a Mother* (1979/1981), which emerged out of an earlier project on women's experiences of housework (1974/1985). Oakley was interested in women's experiences of childbirth and, as such, she conducted detailed interviews with women during and after pregnancy, and in some cases, during the labour itself. Although the news media was showing an interest in rising induction rates and women's experiences of antenatal care during the time of her writing, little work in the social sciences appeared relating to how the treatment of women in childbirth was experienced by the women themselves. Oakley's work drew much needed attention to maternity care and her research was seen to inform academic debate, feminist scholarship, social commentary and childbirth policies. Indeed, Oakley was keen to stress that her role as a social scientist was to energise academic debate while offering an accountable impact in the wider social context, in order to improve the day-to-day lives of individuals (Oakley 2013).

Oakley conducted four, two-hour interviews with each of her participants, starting in pregnancy and concluding five months after the birth of their first child, and she was candid about the interview techniques employed here. Oakley was granted access to the medical records of these women, and spent many hours in their company, but the volume made no mention of research ethic committees or processes. Rather, Oakley herself has acknowledged that the research proposal did not go through such approval stages because these were not stipulated in line with more recent research practices. She has, more recently (with a team of researchers at the Social Science Research Unit), returned to this research and made contact with many of the original participants, where more formal channels of approval had to be established in terms of contacting individuals and requesting consent for interviews.

What was interesting here was Oakley's commentary on the differences between formal interview techniques as they pertain to the field of media and social science research and how she herself conducted her original data gathering. Oakley informed us that she struggled to maintain the mechanical techniques and critical distance routinely demanded from the interview method. The author was open about how she actually ran the interviews rather than a more 'sanitised' version that could have been presented in her book. Indeed, Oakley devoted a chapter in *Becoming a Mother* to the approach undertaken here.

Oakley discovered that women's expectations of pregnancy, labour and motherhood were at odds with the reality of those experiences, causing new mothers to feel scared, ashamed and guilty about their maternal feelings and motherwork practices. Oakley's participants made it clear that they struggled to maintain the appearance of the 'good' mother while feeling emotionally overwhelmed and physically exhausted by the reality of that role. Oakley's work gave respect to mothers and their maternal voices and took the time to present their thoughts, feelings and motherwork practices in a clear and considered volume. Oakley offered crucial insights into the ways in which women experienced childbirth and early parenting, helping us to better understand the ways in which these accounts are (mis)understood in relation to antenatal classes and medical advice, while also making

a valuable contribution to debates concerning the role and responsibilities of the researcher within and beyond the social sciences.

Two decades after the publication of Oakley's seminal research, Christine Everingham contributed to work in women's studies and the sociology of the family in *Motherhood and Modernity* (1994). The theorist studied the links between modernity, rationality and individuation in relation to a debate about motherhood, by drawing on research informed by an 'ethnographic study of maternal-infant interaction in suburban, kinship and alternative playgroup settings'. Previous studies of such relations tended to be located either within the home environment or in laboratory settings, with little understanding of the role of the social-cultural milieu to infant-mother interactions. Everingham engaged in conversation with mothers and went as far as joining in the play activities of the children prior to observing the interaction in these groups so as to blend in and avoid being seen as the 'detached outsider'. On the back of these observations, Everingham went on to conduct more formal, semi-structured interviews with women from each playgroup in relation to the question of parent-child interaction.

Mothers (and on occasion, fathers) were asked about their parenting ideals and expectations before being questioned about the ways in which they learned to look after their children. They were then asked about the reality of that role, who they looked to for help and support, and the role of different social environments on their interactions with their children. Everingham drew attention to feminist theory, notions of morality and the self, maternal attitudes and maternal-infant conflict before concluding that women, across differing group settings, modified their preferred maternal practices and child-rearing ideals during the early child-rearing period, with the assertiveness of the child overriding and overruling the autonomy or agency of the mother. She discovered that friendships and social ties formed through the playgroup and other maternal settings provided an overwhelmingly positive sense of connectedness for mothers, while on occasion being seen as a negative space of judgement and stress for those women who felt responsible for a child's problematic behaviour. In some cases, the latter was seen to lead to a loss of self-esteem for mothers as they

compared the reality of their parenting practices to what they considered to be ideal maternal standards. These findings were relevant, Everingham told us, in relation to broader debates concerning the separating of private and public spheres, the role of mother as the primary care-giver and notions of agency and autonomy for women with children (Everingham 1994).

Like Everingham before her, Sharon Hays employed in-depth interviews, but rather than focusing on the playgroup setting, she looked to understand the ways in which working women adhered to social expectations of motherhood. In *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood* (1998), Hays demonstrated that motherhood, or rather, that acceptable notions of motherhood are prone to shift and flux, charting the development and prevalence of what is now understood as the ideology of intensive mothering. Hays offered a brief content analysis of popular child-rearing manuals before talking to working mothers about their personal and professional experiences. Hays conducted detailed interviews with mothers of two-, three- and four-year-old children from a broad class spectrum and a variety of working positions, asking them about their own upbringing, their routine maternal practices, sources of discipline and avenues of support, feelings about childcare provision and their own position as working mothers.

Through these lengthy interviews she discovered that working women, specifically middle class professional women, were caught in a double bind whereby they were trying to maintain a rational, competitive and ambitious stance in the world of work while holding themselves up to nurturing and selfless childrearing ideals outside of office hours. Although one might look to talk about the balance between work and home life or family-friendly employment practices, the simple example of a mother wanting to spend time at hospital to comfort her sick child when her boss is requesting her presence in the workplace speaks volumes about how women have internalised the ideology of perfect motherhood and the delicate, difficult, balancing of appropriate maternal care and acceptable working practices.

Hays suggested that at a time when greater and growing numbers of women with small children were entering the workplace, society should have been making the practice of mothering a more simple and efficient task, and yet, the ideology of intensive mothering had made this dual role even harder to maintain, exacerbating tensions between the competing



private and public arena for many of these women. In short, 'the cultural model of a rationalized market society coexists in tension with the cultural model of intensive motherhood' (Hays 1998). However, the importance of intensive mothering and the difficulties of living up to the 'good' mother myth is not limited to middle class professionals. Hays' findings echoed those of Everingham before her when she told us that a diverse range of mothers shared 'a set of fundamental assumptions about the importance of putting their children's needs first and dedicating themselves to providing what is best for their kids, as they understand it'. Mothers from different class, education, financial and religious backgrounds may well have demonstrated their own agency in terms of the childrearing advice that they chose to embrace or ignore, and yet they each sought to uphold the ideology of intensive mothering and hold their own maternal practices up against that unrealisable ideal (ibid.).

Naomi Wolf picks up on these motherhood anxieties and practices in *Misconceptions: Truth, Lies and the Unexpected on the Journey to Motherhood* (2002) in a book that interweaved medical fact, personal biography and women's own stories of labour and early motherhood. Wolf was damning of the medicalised version of childbirth that dominated American hospitals in relation to caesarean and episiotomy rates, routine foetal monitoring and labouring positions. Indeed, she made the point that American hospitals encouraged medical intervention in order to create profit for hospitals, telling us that private obstetricians practicing in America currently 'earn far more for performing Caesareans than for attending vaginal births, and hospitals bring in more income that way as well'. She went on to announce that if only 5 per cent of women, those who genuinely needed a caesarean section, had this operation, American hospitals would lose \$1.1 billion revenue annually. The boom in this procedure meant shorter hours at increased pay for obstetricians, and as such it was clear that the professional success of a private medical practice was at odds with the physical and psychological health of the pregnant woman.

On the back of revealing interviews and in many cases traumatic conversations with *primigravidas* on their experiences of medicalised childbirth, Wolf stated that irrespective of time spent with medical staff, pregnancy manuals and birth classes, American women remained ill-informed about

the reality of labour. Moreover, she discovered that the lack of awareness led to feelings of shock, shame, anger and disillusionment when a woman's birth experience bore little relation to her birth plan. Wolf compared her own 'traumatic' birth experience with those of other women to find that what she assumed to be her own rare 'bad' birth experience was actually rather commonplace, coining the term 'ordinary bad birth' to point to the frequency of what she originally thought to be an isolated trauma. Wolf showed great respect for the women that she spoke to and appeared moved by their stories of humiliation, shame, loss and fear, and as such, I would suggest that Wolf, like Oakley before her, struggled with the formal notion of interviewing or mechanical data collection. Wolf started the book by informing the reader that the most common phrase used by her participants was 'I wish someone had told me' followed by the notion that they felt that they were being kept in the dark, not being given all the information, about the experience of childbirth. Wolf agreed that 'quite a lot of important information is too often concealed from pregnant women' and it was this shroud of secrecy that she sought to address in this polemical volume (Wolf 2002).

Writing at a similar time, Tina Miller's enlightening and accessible volume *Making Sense of Motherhood: A Narrative Approach* (2005) gave voice to women's experiences of first-time motherhood, paying particular attention to the ways in which maternal narratives could be seen to develop and shift as mothers adapted to their new-found maternal role. Miller's research was generated by following women for a full year through pregnancy, childbirth and motherhood. This detailed research process involved women being interviewed on three separate occasions, alongside telephone discussions and a questionnaire. She discovered that new mothers struggled with the transition to motherhood, questioned their maternal abilities and felt suffocated by motherwork practices, and yet were afraid to speak out about these difficult early experiences. Like Oakley, Everingham and Wolf before her, Miller discovered that a disjuncture existed between the idea of motherhood and the reality of that role, and made the point that this disharmony between expectation and experience was damaging for the physical and physiological wellbeing of these women.

On the back of her semi-structured longitudinal interviews, Miller noted that the socially acceptable birth plan (seeking a natural birth with minimal intervention with immediate bonding with the newborn) rarely matched up with what was later recounted as a 'bad' or what Wolf refers to as an 'ordinary bad birth' experience, and yet, rather than give voice to this contradiction or draw attention to the disjuncture, many of the women admitted that they perpetuated the unrealistic 'good' birth narrative by silencing themselves or rewriting their stories for fear of judgement from other women and mothers. And this self-silencing continued throughout new motherhood as these women were seen to struggle with 'overwhelming feelings of love, guilt, exhaustion, joy and fear'. Routine maternal practices and recognisable emotions were misunderstood as different or deviant responses to early mothering, and the lack of open dialogue saw these women self-censure what they dare and dare not say about their experiences, which in turn continued to perpetuate the mask of 'good' motherhood and upheld an unrealistic mothering ideal (Miller 2005).

Miller, like many within and beyond the field of motherhood research considered the role of the middle class mother at the expense of her less privileged socio-economic counterparts. In order to counter this gap in the field, Val Gillies presented two separate but related research studies in order to explore working class experiences of parenting in her volume *Marginalised Mothers* (2006). The first was based on single intensive interviews with five working class mothers who mother outside of the nuclear family unit, who lived in high deprivation areas with limited financial resources; the second study was concerned with parenting resources and support as understood through an extensive National Opinion Poll and 25 follow-up interviews. While extant literature from the fields of motherhood, media and social policy tended to focus on the lived experience of motherhood and the revelation of maternal thoughts and practices as they related to middle class mothers, little work accounted for the experiences of those working class mothers who lived outside of the nuclear family unit and who were frequently the focus of public concern and intervention.

The working class mothers in her research sample were seen to suffer from social marginalisation, vulnerability and powerlessness and, as such, these women were forced to make decisions about family life based on their

strained circumstances, so that in many cases, the notion of choice actually precludes genuine choice or option. These women were seen to make the best choices for their children based on available resources. While middle class mothers were seen struggling to uphold the ideology of intensive mothering, these working class women were more concerned with 'obtaining sufficient money and securing decent housing' with disadvantage leading to poorer health and fewer life chances for their children.

The analysis presented here, based on the accounts of lone mothers who were in receipt of welfare benefits highlighted both the financial difficulties faced by these women and the emotional responsibilities that they faced with limited support. These mothers did not choose single motherhood, but rather, had it foisted upon them when faced with an absent father, or made the decision to leave a violent relationship for the sake of the children. Gillies made the point that these women could have had a more secure future had they themselves chosen to leave their children, but that in each case, these women faced long-term hardship as they struggled with the single parenting role. We find that these women routinely fed, clothed, housed and educated children on an income that would barely sustain an individual, while 'actively compensating for the day-to-day experience of disadvantage through love, protection ... humour and affirmation'. Gillies informed us that motherhood was central to contemporary debates about class, with working class mothers being 'depicted as ignorant, promiscuous, uncaring, irresponsible and most significantly, undeserving'. However, this work examined notions of class and race in order to challenge those long-standing negative images of working class motherhood that dominated the media agenda and policy initiatives, and highlighted the fact that professional discourses around appropriate parenting were grounded in middle class advantage for women who were in a position to make genuine choices for themselves and their families removed from economic and social constraints (Gillies 2006).

Pamela Stone returned to an examination of privileged middle class motherwork, taking the idea of the 'opt-out' revolution as the basis for her original research in *Opting Out: Why Women Really Quit Careers and Head Home* (2008). Stone interviewed high-achieving professional married mothers from the fields of medicine, law and finance in order to discover

their reasons for leaving the workplace. We were routinely shown statistics concerning working and stay at home mothers, and these were often used as the basis for social policy family initiatives, but little research had given these women a voice to explain or explore their decisions. Stone commented that our limited understanding of these women was based on popular media stories that followed a predictable set of tropes starting with the professional women who had devoted many years to her public success (making sure to mention the supportive employer who happily accommodated family and work responsibilities) and concluding with the notion that motherhood was the most important and most rewarding job in the world. Along this journey we were reminded that children were a blessing and that the once high-powered woman now wanted to spend more quality time with her offspring. Stone questioned this recurring narrative, and asked herself, if the company was so supportive of family friendly policies, why then were these women leaving rather than reducing hours, considering job shares, working to flexible contracts or working from a home base.

The new and recent mothers that she spoke to made it clear that although they wanted a personal and professional life balance, the reality of the work environment and social support systems made such a balance improbable. These women were not leaving to save face for being dismissed from the workplace, nor were they leaving to embrace the 'new traditionalist' role. Rather, Stone made the point that these women were less choosing to leave the world of work and more being pushed towards the domestic context by an inflexible corporate structure, ineffectual social policies and unhealthy cultural expectations. While these women may have spoken about their decision to leave the world of work to take up a full-time maternal role in terms of choice and privilege, the 'stories they tell reveal not the expression of choice, but rather the existence of a choice gap, a gap that is a function of a double bind created primarily by the conditions of work in the gilded cages of elite professions'. These women were unsuccessful in seeking flexibility and found themselves marginalised in what was understood as their 'full-time plus' working role. On leaving then, these women went on to face a crisis of confidence and loss of direction, however rewarding their maternal lives (Stone 2008).

While Stone pointed to a lack of gender equality or parental flexibility in the professional workplace, Rebecca Asher has more recently conducted detailed interviews in order to examine notions of equality in the family. On the back of these accounts, she suggested that women may well outperform men at school and university, seek professional careers on the back of their educational successes, and demand equality from their chosen partners, but went on to say that any semblance of equality was destroyed when the wife or girlfriend became a mother. In *Shattered: Modern Motherhood and the Illusion of Equality* (2012), Asher echoed existing work as she discovered that women continued to be held responsible for childcare, at the expense of their social, sexual and professional lives, with little resistance to the traditional nurturing role that underpinned accepted notions of family.

Asher drew on accounts of parenting in and beyond the UK and uncovered the ways in which antenatal care, maternity leave, parenting manuals, work practices, relationship dynamics and childcare costs each contributed to the unequal status of mothers and fathers in society. Like many writers before her, Asher's interest in this subject and her ability to speak to men and women about their parenting roles and responsibilities stemmed from her own biography. Asher spoke of her own personal and professional experiences, and highlighted her shock and anger to find that what she assumed to be a position of equality in her domestic arrangements was in fact a thin veneer, revealed as such after pregnancy. One might suggest that Asher's research was an attempt to discover whether her private experiences of traditional domestic roles and the unexpected return to a conservative family agenda was confined to her own experiences, or if it commented on a wider inequality. The age-old feminist adage that the 'personal is political' underpinned much of the work outlined here, with motherhood studies being dominated by not only women and feminist writers, but also mothers and professional childcare experts. While theorists such as Wolf (2002) and Asher (2012) were candid about the ways in which their own maternal experiences had impacted upon their professional research practices, Gina Ford used her decade-long experiences as a maternity nurse to advise parents about the importance of order and routine for their babies and toddlers.

Ford played an important role in the cultural construction of appropriate motherhood, penning volumes such as *The Contented Little Baby Book of Weaning* (2006), *The Complete Sleep Guide for Contented Babies and Toddlers* (2006), *The Contented Baby's First Year* (2007) and *From Crying Baby to Contented Baby* (2010) to name but a few of her titles. However, Ford has more recently contributed to the field of motherhood studies by speaking to hundreds of women both in person and via her popular website, ContentedBaby.Com during her research for *Good Mother Bad Mother* (2013). There was little written here in terms of feminist approaches or media studies methodologies, after all Ford was writing as a leading baby and childcare expert rather than someone grounded in the conventions of the social sciences. And yet, in line with extant literature from the field of motherhood studies, her research spoke to each of these fields as the author gave voice to existing mothers throughout the volume, interweaved with stories from her own childhood.

Ford pointed to changes in motherhood and motherwork over the last four decades, discovering that for those women who choose motherhood, their decision 'to sacrifice freedom, time and money in order to become a parent has made the desire to get it right more acute than ever' (Ford 2014). The author acknowledged the challenges faced by contemporary mothering and suggested that despite the wealth of often well-meaning parenting information, many women continued to feel overwhelmed by the responsibility of making childcare decisions in the face of conflicting advice regarding feeding, weaning, routines and work. These women revealed that they felt isolated as mothers for fear of a maternal judgement that saw Everingham, Miller and Wolf's participants' self-censure. Ford relayed the candid views expressed by a diverse range of mothers who had given up careers, those forced back into the workplace, those struggling alone with new babies and those enjoying their newfound maternal role, with stories sharing tales of friendship and intimacy, rejection and bitterness.

Ford made the point that there was no such thing as a 'good' or 'bad' mother, simply differing maternal styles and motherwork practices. Ford asked mothers to accept and respect maternal differences and focus their attention not on judging other women, but in lobbying the media, employers and government to improve the lives of women and children. Ford is

a controversial voice within and beyond the field of self-help literature, parental networking sites and motherhood studies and yet, like many of the authors introduced here, she was reflexive about her own childhood and her professional experiences in her work on the maternal. This brings us full circle to the founder of motherhood studies, Ann Oakley, as she commented on her own work and the wider research agenda in and beyond the field of motherhood studies. She informed us that, 'in the vast majority of cases, the choice of research topic amongst social scientists reflects a mixture of the personal and the professional' (Oakley 2013).

Tamara Mose Brown and Erynn Masi de Casanova went one stage further than those researchers who choose to study motherhood on the back of their newfound maternal status. Their research was dedicated to examining and potentially exploiting the maternal status of the social scientist in ethnographic studies involving women as mothers. For those researchers who are mothers, we are told that 'engaging in ethnographic fieldwork with women provides a unique opportunity to analyse the effects of motherhood in the research process and relations with participants'. They went on to suggest that the 'lens' of motherhood could be utilised to enrich ethnographic accounts by reflecting on the multiple role of the maternal researcher and by building a rapport between participants and researchers.

Feminist scholars have long put forward the idea that female researchers studying female participants, lend themselves to a more open dialogue, allowing for a deeper understanding of social issues, and yet, Brown and de Casanova more recently suggested that motherhood 'humanizes the researcher in ways that are not always disclosed in academic writing, even in ethnographies that reflexively analyse the researcher's class/racial/gender identity'. Their article was a reflexive analysis by two ethnographers whose status as mothers became an important component of studies of working women in Guayaquil, Ecuador, and Brooklyn, New York who found that motherhood provided a 'different type of access to participants' and affected the way that people in the field reacted to a researcher and her work.

The researchers/mothers commented that 'the language of motherhood coloured many conversations and interactions' and spoke of the times when their maternal status left them feeling 'like a participant' rather than the professional ethnographer. On occasion the line between mother and



ethnographer became blurred, for example when one author admitted that she was putting on a maternal performance in light of what she believed was expected from her participants and for 'fear of being inappropriate in their eyes and having them lose respect for [her] as a mother'. Social scientists are trained to write in an impartial, objective and scientific voice, but these researchers sought to debunk the fiction of objective social science research by striving towards transparency and 'an integration of the author-as-researcher with the author-as-mother' (Brown and de Casanova 2009).

If we are to look to motherhood studies beyond the framework of film, television or media studies research it is clear that a number of feminist and social science researchers are keen to speak to mothers about their maternal experiences through a range of qualitative techniques, including those interviews, questionnaires and focus group discussions employed within media studies and its surrounding disciplines. Such research offers useful and significant insights into the lived reality of pregnancy, new motherhood and the reality of combining paid professional work with maternal commitments. However, research to date says little about the ways in which women respond to representations of motherhood, motherwork and the maternal role in the media environment, or about the ways in which these maternal depictions inform or challenge their own maternal choices and motherwork practices. In this way this book hopes to uncover some of the ways in which women think about their own maternal thoughts and feelings in relation to those popular televisual representations that dominate the media landscape.

## What, who and how to ask: Qualitative questioning

Research already exists to account for the myriad of maternal depictions that exist on the small screen and beyond, and although this research is a crucial starting point for an understanding of the ways in which society might come to make sense of motherhood, it tells us little about the ways in which mothers in the audience read and respond to these maternal representations.

Theorists such as Radway, Stacey, Oakley and Gillies made it clear that academic interpretations and 'knowledgeable' readings can be, and often are, at odds with more populist responses, and as such I was keen to discover the ways in which mothers in the television audience experienced pleasure, identification, frustration and disappointment as they watched their maternal counterparts in a range of fictional and factual programming.

Extant literature draws on an impressive range of data collection methods and approaches including questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, participant observations, focus group discussions and the text-in-action approach, and it is clear that each author has spent substantial time and energy considering the implications of each approach in relation to their chosen research proposal. So too, I have had to carefully consider the ways in which I looked to speak to women in the audience about their social and maternal status, viewing preferences and responses to representations of mothers on screen.

As research in the field of qualitative data gathering and audience studies recommends, I considered the use of face-to-face interviews, telephone surveys, focus group discussions and text-in-action observations, paying attention to the ways in which social media and network sites such as Twitter might be useful in relation to debates over participation, convergence and interactivity. Although I do not want to spend the entirety of this volume outlining the stages, strengths and limitations of individual and differently combined methods and approaches, I will give a very brief outline for readers uninitiated in research methods and point to further resources should they be inclined to discover the historical and theoretical specificity of qualitative data techniques.

## Questionnaires and surveys

The questionnaire, as used by Larson and Stacey, is a popular and long-standing media research method that can, in its various guises, standardise the collection and processing of information so that set questions can

be asked to a large number of people from the relevant demographic. In this way, the questionnaire is understood as a useful method for finding out about individual opinions attitudes and behaviour. However, there are a number of ways in which one might employ this particular method, ranging from closed questioning if one requires factual information and more open-ended questions if one is keen to engage respondents' opinions at length. Questionnaires then are flexible and can be used effectively for both the large-scale social survey and more qualitative methods of research. The self-completion questionnaire has become popular of late, in part due to the emergence of sites such as Google Forms and Survey Monkey. One might consider this method as the forms are relatively simple to compile, cost effective and can be used to garner information from a large population sample. And yet, even though self-completion questionnaires, be it on paper or online, are easy to post physically and electronically, respondents might seek help, advice or contextual information which is not to hand, and as such, completion rates tend to be low. With this in mind, researchers might look towards either telephone surveys or face-to-face questioning in order to increase completion rates from their chosen population.

Telephone surveys are rarely used in contemporary media research even though they have some obvious advantages in terms of ease of administration and cost-effectiveness. However, due to the very real possibility of phoning in inopportune times, it is advised that researchers looking to use this technique write to the respondents in advance, possibly weeks in advance, in order to introduce themselves and perhaps arrange a mutually convenient time to ask their set questions. That said, this can only be considered for those surveys where contact details can be chosen in advance and with parties interested enough to respond to the written request. Moreover, existing literature highlights some of the limitations of this method when it comments on the lack of personal contact and the ways in which potential respondents might be dubious about both the research and the researcher in an age of telemarketing and cold-calling (Hansen *et al.* 1998). With this in mind, it is important to understand the opportunities that arise from the face-to-face interview method.

## Interviews and focus group discussions

The interview is a useful technique for gathering detailed opinions as they relate to the mass media, and theorists such as Oakley and Press have utilised this particular approach in their work. Interviews are a flexible method as the researcher has control over the structure of the interaction and because it allows them to change the direction of the dialogue in response to comments presented on the back of a tentatively worded set of questions outlined in the interview guide (Priest 2010). Oral history interviews follow a similar pattern to the traditional interview, with participants often being referred to as the narrator rather than participant or interviewee because this technique encourages individuals to talk about their lives. While the traditional interview sees the interviewer in control of the process, however adaptable and flexible that process might be, the oral history interview shifts this dynamic in order to 'allow the narrator to take the interview in the direction he or she wants to go' (Brennen 2012). This process demands time and emotional commitment from both interviewer and narrator, because unlike the interview technique, the relationship between these parties is crucial and depends on a rapport being allowed to develop prior to the first recorded oral history. Although some have questioned the reliability and credibility of such in-depth interviews, the goal here is less about uncovering truth or fact, but rather about trying to understand emotion, meaning and feelings. That said, there are of course limitations with both the traditional interview and the oral history approach. On a practical note they demand, like the telephone survey before them, scheduling at a time of mutual convenience and in the case of the oral history, the arrangement of several sessions over any given period. The strength of these techniques over the telephone survey method is that it allows for face-to-face contact which goes some way towards negotiating any tensions regarding authority and authenticity that might exist in the previous method.

If one is looking to speak to participants directly then researchers usually have to make a choice between single person dialogue or group

interaction. The focus group technique is credited with presenting the most 'natural' setting for the participant, based on the idea that the ways in which we understand the media and make sense of our relationship with it usually takes the form of a discussion in a social setting, which the focus group seeks to emulate. That said, there are clear difficulties in acquiring shared group permissions and a schedule to suit numerous participants. Moreover, one must consider the necessary preparations regarding the dynamics of each group and the formulation of a menu of topics that will engage all participants in discussion. Furthermore, the role of the researcher becomes that of the moderator in this more social setting.

Although the focus group might be commended for its group dynamics, it is these self-same dynamics that are seen as the possible limitation of the method. If one uses the interview technique it avoids the predictable consensus associated with group discussions whereby a single voice or opinion comes to dominate an initially divergent group due to individual members speaking vocally, eloquently, at length or all of the above. If one is interested in group dynamics but fears the very real possibility of these group interactions morphing into the enthusiastic reasoning of one or two members of that group, then it might be worth using self-selecting groups, small numbers of individuals who are related, work together or attend the same social groups for example so that they are comfortable and thus conversant in the company of one another, helping to alleviate the differing dynamics of more random group sampling. Indeed, these 'naturalistic' discussions can draw out complexities, nuances and contradictions, or promote what is referred to as a 'memory synergy' among participants whereby the social nature of the setting can encourage efforts to bring forth the 'collective memory' of a particular group (Kamberelis and Dimitriadis 2013). Furthermore, depending on the project in question, one might look to combine the self-selecting nature of the focus group with the comfort and convenience of a domestic setting, so as to further encourage the 'naturalness' of the group discussion as routine in more ethnographic approaches.

## Observation, ethnographies and netnographies

Ethnographies demand that researchers observe, talk to and interact with people in their natural environments, be it where they work, socialise or their domestic space in order to ‘learn about the explicit and tacit realms of their experiences, routines and practices’ (Brennen 2012). For those projects where a form of participant observation is crucial, this seems a useful addition to the methodological choices currently on offer within the fields of media and motherhood studies. The technique has clear time and timing implications for both researcher and participant but it is without question the most natural setting for the person or group being studied.

Researchers have recently started to look to new media technologies in order to conduct ethnographic studies online, or what have become known as netnographies, with self-selecting groups and professional networks. We know that ‘people with similar interests, values and beliefs create virtual communities in an effort to identify and bring together like-minded people to hang out, discuss issues and topics, and coordinate activities’ (ibid.), and these online spaces can be examined in order to gather audience reviews, commentaries and communications. Theorists in media and gender studies have looked to the blogosphere as a way to understand media audiences and relationships between audiences and texts beyond predictable fan sites or pedestrian celebrity authored pages, with fascinating work existing on the growing number of memorial (Ibrahim 2010; Christensen 2010) and infertility weblogs (Striff 2005) that have appeared in recent years. Such netnographies share similar characteristics with simple observations in that the researcher takes a ‘fly on the wall’ approach to their subject and participants, participants who remain unaware of the researcher’s activities (Deacon *et al.* 1999).

Online criticism, commentary and conversation can be easily and inconspicuously observed, and as such, it can be seen as a contemporary extension of earlier observational methods. For example, existing work seeks to explore the potential of social network sites such as Twitter as locations

for audience research in relation to examples of those who both engage with and in some cases create the news and television commentary (Deller 2011). Twitter has become a commonplace communication forum since its emergence in 2006, with those who utilise this network communicating via 'tweets' or messages of 140 characters or less. This micro-blogging website can be understood as part of an academic debate concerning interactivity and participatory cultures that has emerged in recent years (Jenkins 2009; Couldry, Livingstone and Markham 2009). The 'style and content of tweets varies from simple link sharing or retweeting with little to no commentary, to one-to-one conversation, to talk between a small number of users engaging in direct address,' with the most popular tweets taking the form of one to many conversation (Deller 2011). With this in mind, Twitter alone offers researchers a wealth of opportunities for making sense of audiences, consumers and prosumers, and the links between them in the contemporary media marketplace. Research drawing on such social networking sites could choose to monitor hashtags or keywords, it might look at the changing and in flux 'trending topics' in relation to a broader social, sexual, political or entertainment arena; alternatively, it might look to a more detailed examination of interactions between specific users, or the relationship between a celebrity (be it a person, programme or paper) and their followers. Using Twitter in audience research can help us locate zeitgeist media moments and understand public responses to real-world events and news stories as they happen (*ibid.*).

The anxiety here is that much of what appears on Twitter is about performance, by way of usernames, avatars, twibbons and humour, and researchers may want to look beyond such deliberate role-playing to examine attitudes, beliefs, opinions and behaviours that may be exaggerated or overlooked in such real-time social networking sites. However, as Ruth Deller rightly argues, 'Twitter marks a potentially significant development ... for anyone interested in studying the media, studying the way "audiences" and celebrities, producers and media professionals now interact [after all] it provides instant access to people who are often happy to communicate their thoughts and feelings in an articulate and succinct way' (*ibid.*).

## Choosing media methods and finding maternal audiences

The aim of my research was to gather information from mothers about if and how they watch depictions of motherhood on television and, where possible, if they would talk to me about their pleasures and frustrations, role models or negative responses to particular maternal figures. On the back of the work outlined here, I am aware of the importance of choosing the most appropriate research method, not simply in terms of general pragmatic, practical concerns relating to time resources, economic factors or research ethics involving human participants, but in relation to the appropriateness of the method for garnering meaningful information from a broad demographic of mothers in the television-watching audience.

Interviews were ruled out due to the class-based concerns encountered by Skeggs, Thumin and Wood and telephone surveys for this same reason. Focus group discussions were discounted next due to the bias of voices heard in a group setting as discovered in Jackson, Stevenson and Brooks' research. The text-in-action approach provides an important and as yet, little seen way of unmasking audience readings and responses to specific entertainment texts, and yet, as it is not my intention to set the television reference points for this research, such observation is not without problem here. Moreover, what all of these options had in common was the logistical difficulty and organisational challenge of women who were busy with childcare and in many cases other personal and professional responsibilities, trying to find a time and place to meet with either myself or myself and others. Although I could meet these women at a pre-arranged work or social setting, plans change due to the changing demands of employers and dependents. And although technologies such as Skype and GoogleHangOut allow a little more spontaneity for interviews and groups discussions, time constraints still existed on both sides. Indeed, when I first proposed face to face (or their online equivalent) meetings with mothers in the initial stages of the research plan, the overwhelming response was that these women would simply not have the time to take part in discussions, and, to a person, they



commented that they were '*too busy*' or could not specify a scheduled meeting slot in advance, irrespective of their interest in the project.

With this in mind I decided to pursue the questionnaire as the most credible mode of study for my research. This is not to say that the questionnaire is not without its limitations; indeed, all of the methods and approaches pointed to here have strengths and weaknesses irrespective of the ways in which they are utilised within any given research project. Rather, on consideration of all available audience research options, the questionnaire appeared to be the most appropriate for my purposes. Although questionnaires have historically been conducted in person, with the researcher talking participants through each question and answer option, as a sole researcher seeking to make contact with significant numbers of mothers across a range of social, sexual, class and geographical locations, it became clear that due to the logistics of the proposal, the questionnaire would have to take an online form. This enabled those women who were '*too busy*' or those without a predictable schedule to complete the form at their convenience without having to plan or prepare, travel or juggle responsibilities. This is not to suggest that the online questionnaire was the only or best way to conduct my research, but in terms of the time, cost and sampling implications, it became the most desirable method available. I am being candid about my choice of approach here, because although it is possible to present a narrative that suggests that the online questionnaire is the only suitable option for gathering the required data for my research, such partial reporting ignores the fact that '*compromises are an essential feature*' of any research project (Hansen *et al.* 1998).

Online questionnaires are a popular way to explore opinions and interrogate contemporary behavioural patterns, but without the face-to-face contact with potential respondents, it was crucial that the number, ordering and wording of questions was considered carefully. The first attempt included too many questions, the second attempted to offer too few, but within each of these there were then sub-questions, and both were, on reflection, trying too hard to gather every detail concerning viewing habits, character and programme preferences and then a breakdown of maternal readings through genre categories. The form relied too heavily on closed

questions and drop-down lists in order to garner what I hoped to be useful data from respondents, without encouraging more detailed responses or providing greater space for more considered observations. Media method textbooks routinely remind us that questionnaires must be fairly short with a limited number of questions so as to prevent interested respondents giving up part way through a lengthy and arduous set of enquiries (ibid.), and therefore, after several further attempts at adding, excluding, re-ordering and re-wording individual entries, I ended up with some questions that I felt I had to include, many I wanted to include and several that I felt that I ought to include, with space given to incorporate basic socio-demographic data.

### *About you*

The 'About You' section of the form asked participants to provide details of their living, marital, employment and job status, age, ethnic group and number of children, and yet, even though this section of the questionnaire did not seem particularly demanding to produce or time consuming to complete, it remained a significant and yet difficult section for many reasons.

It was crucially important that when looking at the comments and responses of completed questionnaires I was able to draw conclusions on the back of age, socio-economic, ethnic or marital differences if relevant or appropriate to the findings. If teen mothers respond differently than their more mature counterparts or if single mothers speak of alternative pleasures and frustrations than married or co-habiting mothers then this makes for relevant data to be explored and presented. Differences and similarities, contradictions or a consensus between biological, foster, adoptive and other mothers is also crucial to this discussion, and it would have been to the detriment of the project to not seek out this information. However, I am fully aware that what seems like basic demographic details are fraught with potential upset and anxieties for the individual. Being asked to identify themselves as a teen or more mature mother may be asking more than to simply tick a box, but could lead to introspection about their marginalised maternal status. So too, asking about marital status may be difficult for anyone who has been recently divorced, widowed or considering leaving the

family unit. Moreover, asking someone to reveal their status as a biological or alternative mother may lead to feelings of regret, failure or inadequacy for those who have chosen not to, or who are unable to conceive, or who have aborted, miscarried or lost a baby. By asking women to differentiate themselves as natural or other maternal figures, I could be seen to be adding to the unconscious weight of a society that upholds biological mothering as the appropriate and ideal form of maternal care. Indeed, providing an answer to the question of maternal status might in itself be problematic for some recent mothers who have looked to assisted reproductive technologies, where donor eggs and a gestational surrogate is used.

It was certainly not my intention in gathering this data to cause upset or offence to any mothers, but after much moral, ethical and practical considerations, I felt that it was important data that could be invaluable to this and future research. However, the participants were not obliged to complete this section of the form, and were able to skip such maternal and marital questions and still send their responses without such personal details being revealed. It is worth noting of course that all of the responses are anonymous – neither myself nor anyone looking at the book will be able to tell who these women are, and their responses will only be recognisable to themselves should they wish to read the work and compare it with their original contribution to the questionnaire. And such anonymity is made clear to the participants in the polite request for their time and in the questionnaire itself.

In terms of questions regarding age, ethnicity, employment and job status I looked to relevant professional bodies for clarification of classification. For example, in terms of age, I looked to a range of standardised survey classifications for their breakdown of age groups (Gerstmann 2014); for employment details, I looked to the Office for National Statistics and the ways in which they categorise different unit groups based on similarity of qualifications, training, skills and experience commonly associated with the competent performance of work tasks, ranging from Managers and Directors to what they refer to as Elementary Occupations (ONS 2014a). And likewise, I used the ethnic classifications set out by the Office for National Statistics as they ‘recommended when a show card is used in a face-to-face interview or self-completion survey’ (ONS 2014b). Although

completing this section may not appear problematic, there are of course still concerns here relating to people's social and class perceptions perhaps not mapping onto extant employment categories, creating friction or frustration at the end of the questionnaire. However, it was important that I not only included them here, but used recognisable and credible classifications for such data to add rigor to the research gathered and to avoid any oversights or unintended bias to the classifications included.

## Questions

The phrasing of each question might seem a modest task, but in reality, trying to word each question in a way that was accessible to all potential audiences was difficult, not because I was using impenetrable theories or committed to dense academic conventions, but simply because I struggled to phrase the questions in an open, engaging and impartial manner. Giving participants enough detail in the question so that they could fill in the form in a way that provided relevant and meaningful information was difficult without actually pointing them to particular characters, programmes or case studies. Although it was of course tempting to ask them about specific texts, on-screen personnel or pre-selected family structures, this seemed problematic. The point of this research was to find out how the maternal audience responds to images of motherhood, images that *they* define, outline and comment on. For me to provide characters and case studies here was inappropriate considering the aims of the research, and as such I looked to gather feedback on the questionnaire. My aim here was to present the voice of the audience, not to limit, frame or curtail discussion from the outset.

I piloted the form amongst colleagues and a broader set of co-workers, friends and acquaintances outside of the academic environment in order to assess the use, ease and appropriateness for a diverse audience. Indeed, it is commonplace to 'administer several rounds of questionnaire testing [in order to] identify ambiguous questions or those respondents find hard to answer' (Priest 2010). On the back of constructive feedback, I included

guidance and helpful commentary under each question in order to assist the participant in answering, not in a way that leads their answer or prompts a particular response, but rather, to offer a frame of reference and supporting context for each question posed.

Rather than just post a questionnaire in isolation, it was important that in the absence of personal contact with respondents, the questionnaire be situated in a broader website that introduced my professional role and responsibilities, details of past research within the fields of gender and popular media culture and information relating to the motherhood research that I was embarking on. What I hoped to have achieved here was an accessible and informative site for those who were considering completing my questionnaire, demonstrating the authenticity of my professional role, the relevance of the research, the importance of their voice to the debate, a broader set of references and resources for any parties interested in pursuing their own reading, and my contact details for those individuals or organisations who would be interested in follow-up discussions and continued dialogue. The final website, entitled 'Mothers on Mothers: Maternal Readings of Popular Television' offered a welcome, details about myself as the researcher, an overview of the project, information for participants, the questionnaire itself and further follow-up resources (Feasey 2014b).

I am not claiming to have obtained a representative sample of the population; rather, my research is based on a self-selecting sample of mothers who took the time and effort to familiarise themselves with my work, read the questionnaire and respond (in most cases, at length) to the questions posed. I am aware that many mothers will be excluded from expressing their thoughts in this context due in part to the very real digital divide in this country whereby 17 per cent of households do not have access to the internet (ONS 2013a), and beyond that, there are issues relating to time pressures and competing demands on those women whom I might want to contact. But I have been rigorous in my question selection, reflective throughout several pilot stages of the questionnaire and careful to speak to those organisations that were in a position to help me to reach the relevant maternal population.

In order to gather rigorous and relevant data it was important to reach as many mothers as possible and as such I compiled a list of useful

contacts ranging from friends and extended family to charities, social media groups and governmental organisations. In the first instance I contacted all Bath Spa staff and students and requested that the mothers in that group consider completing the form, then relying on the snowball technique whereby these women then contacted their extended friends and family networks in person, online and through social media such as Facebook. I then requested that colleagues present this request at a number of other institutions across the UK, including Manchester, Winchester, Leicester, Chester, East Anglia and Bournemouth. After exhausting my personal and professional contacts I spoke to a broad range of organisations which were responsive to my request to post details asking for mothers in their audience to familiarise themselves with the research project and then complete the short questionnaire. I made it clear here and throughout this stage of my research that the work was non-commercial and that all responses would be anonymous and treated in confidence in order to further encourage participation and engagement with the questionnaire presented.

Details of my research and a request for respondents appeared on a range of local motherhood themed social media groups such as Bath Mums (Feasey 2014c). Bath Mums is one of many local online maternal support groups that have been set up by volunteers and sustained by local advertising revenue. Bath Mums is a free, open and candid social media hub full of information about schools and nurseries, activities to do with children ranging from the baby years to teenagers and parental recommendations in the South West region. Sites such as these are seen to offer emotional and more practical support from parents to parents with no pre-existing political, religious or other agenda. Such online communities are freely available to those with computer access and inclusive of all mothers and grandmothers in terms of class, age, race, sexual preference and lifestyle choices. These maternal sites stood out as useful spaces in which to advertise my research request. Likewise, Netmums (Feasey 2014d), the central resource for a number of different local online support groups kindly agreed to my request, so too, did Mumsnet (Feasey 2014e). Mumsnet was one of the first, and is now the most far-reaching and visible support network for parents. Since its emergence in 2000, the site has sought to make 'parents' lives easier by pooling knowledge, advice and support' with limited

moderation or censure (mumsnet 2014a). The site now generates over 60 million page views and over 10 million visits per month, and for a small fee I was able to speak to this maternal audience through their dedicated media request page. Due to the high traffic on these local, regional and national sites, it is naïve to assume that I would be speaking directly to or receive responses from the whole population of users, but even a miniscule percentage of those women who look to these pages for advice, support or company would provide invaluable data for this research project.

I then spoke to a local nursery chain covering the Bath and Wiltshire area who posted details of my research project on their award-winning website, their monthly magazine and gave out flyers to interested mothers as they came in and out of their nurseries over a period of several weeks. Although one might talk about the limited reach of this avenue in comparison with online maternal networking sites, the enthusiastic and personable introduction to the research project by known and trusted nursery staff made this a valuable and perhaps indeed, the most productive way of capturing interested mothers. The request foregrounded not only my academic status and affiliation but also my personal interest in the project as a way to connect to those mothers who showed an interest in participating in person or via my website.

I also publicised the research project and my request for participants on Media Parents, a website and organisation which seeks to situate all of the short-term, job share and part-time media employment in one place to 'help freelance working parents or anyone who wants to work flexibly to balance the demands of media and other commitments, and to make it easier for employers to find this highly skilled and experienced part of the media workforce' (MediaParents 2014a). The site tells us that 5,000 women left the television sector alone over the last three years, and it is clear that there is a link between these numbers and the amount of women becoming mothers in this environment, a sector well known for its unsociable hours and lack of routine family-friendly policies (Dent 2013; O'Brien 2014). The website puts over 700 employers, freelancers and networkers in contact with one another, and many creative employees are women seeking flexible contracts that enable them to spend quality time at home while maintaining a professional career. Indeed, the testimonials currently published on

the website make it clear that not only is work in the creative industry at odds with the domestic routine of parenting but that this discord is actually preventing people from starting families for fear of what they see as an impossible work–life balance:

I just want to say what a fantastic job you've done setting up this much needed site!! I'm not a parent yet, as I've been putting it off and putting it off, because I was worried about finding flexible work hours and still making an ok living. (Media Parents 2014b)

Worried, with reason, as another commentator on the site tells us of the perceived reaction to motherhood in the creative sector and the working routines associated with television production. We are told that it has 'been tough getting back into TV since having my son 9 months ago as I can no longer accept jobs that require you to be working very unsociable hours' (ibid.). Other voices echo her very real concerns here:

Being pregnant was a difficult enough adjustment, so not having felt confident enough to apply for broadcast roles, anticipating a negative reaction to 'the bump' – even when it was a very small one – hasn't made me feel especially bright about the future. (ibid.)

I worked bloody hard to carve myself a career as a drama script editor, so hard in fact that by the time I got my first script-editing job I was reaching prime baby making age. Once my first child came along there was no way I could fit the expected long hours around child rearing, and so I've had to say goodbye to both my income and my career hopes and dreams. It seems so short sighted of companies to lose talented women (and men) in this way. Within drama production, especially long running series, there's a culture of working long long hours – you get to prove yourself by staying up all night working on scripts and taking them home at weekends. Surely it's common sense that employees will give better quality work if they are happier and can balance work with other parts of life. Why burn people out and send them away exhausted and half crazy when you could respect employees' needs, get them trained up to do the job just right, and keep hold of them for years? (ibid.)

One member refers to her children as her 'dirty little secret' (ibid.) and wonders at what point in networking opportunities does she bring up the fact that she has children in order to both explain gaps in her professional career and to foreground her need for flexible working. Although several



members go on to thank the professional networking site for its role in finding them flexible employment, the problem of finding harmony between the public and private realm remains for this and other sectors.

After discussions with the site editor, I was asked to write a short ‘5 minutes with ...’ about my interest in representations of gender and my current project on maternal audiences, with the intention of drawing further attention to my research request for participants. I noted my desire to introduce undergraduate students to the media theory behind and the wider socio-political context that informs our understandings of contemporary gender roles before explaining my research narrative through masculinity studies to motherhood in the media, drawing attention to my personal and professional profile as it relates to my interest in motherhood and motherwork in the media. I made the point that although I have spent my entire professional life researching the representation of gender in a range of media genres, texts and mediums including the representation of male friendship in the situation comedy, fatherhood in the crime drama, the role of sisterhood in teen television, the importance of gossip and star styles in celebrity gossip magazines and the notion of female ageing in relationship to contemporary Hollywood performers, I had shown no academic or pedagogical interest in representations of or responses towards motherhood in the media ... and the next part is of course incredibly predictable. I went on to note that ‘... I became a mother, and soon after I came to the realisation that although my research to date had been interesting, relevant, or (on the rare occasion) both, it was crucial for me to rethink what was important about gender and the media’ (Media Parents 2014c).

In order to reach a different employment market I contacted the Environment Agency in their position as a large government quango with a reputation for family-friendly policies and flexible working patterns for employees. The Employers Network for Equality and Inclusion talks about the Environment Agency’s Women’s Network, and its attempts to ‘encourage, enable and equip women to achieve their full potential in the workplace’ (ENEI 2014). On the back of this initiative the network has created a job share register, whereby the CEO and Directors have agreed that all roles within the agency are eligible for a job share, with Director-level approval needed if someone believes a role is not suitable. Details about

my research was posted on the Environment Agency Women's Networking 'Community' which reaches 1,300 members and friends of the group, and what is worth noting here is that the publication of my request was positioned above a piece from the Diversity Confidence Programme entitled 'Taking a "Yes if" Approach to Flexible Working', which gave details of flexible working roadshows being held around the country in that week to help make such working patterns successful for staff and managers alike.

Details about my research and a request for mothers to complete my questionnaire was later posted in a National Childbirth Trust newsletter, with a potential reach of 100,000 members over 300 branches (NCT 2014a, 2014b). The NCT is a UK-based charity offering information and support in pregnancy, childbirth and early parenthood, and although there have been many changes to the charity since its emergence in the 1960s, it remains committed to ensuring 'all parents-to-be and new parents feel supported, informed and confident' (NCT 2014c). And again, although I cannot demand or assume that all members will be interested in or have the time or technology available to complete my questionnaire, having the potential audience of several thousand mothers must be seen as a rigorous and relevant point of contact for my research.

I have spoken elsewhere about the middle class bias of mumsnet, and even a cursory glance at the threads, news and reviews makes it clear that those women who look at and contribute to this site come from a position of privilege (Feasey 2012a), in many cases reflecting the ideology of intensive mothering and the appropriate face of the 'good' mother, or seeking advice in order to help them situate themselves in line with this romanticised figure. With this in mind one might assume that those mothers who completed the questionnaire after seeing the details posted on the Media Hub on this website are positioned in the middle classes. So too, those respondents who have found my questionnaire by way of the Ofsted Outstanding nursery chain, Media Parents or the Environment Agency might also be assumed to reside within the comfortable classes. While an Ofsted Outstanding nursery chain does not exclude working class families, the cost of such childcare outside of those hours subsidised by the government for three- and four-year-olds does prohibit those on lower incomes. Media Parents and The Environment Agency, although

interested in different skills and competences in their employers, are both interested in trained professionals, again suggesting a level of formal education or industry experience that hint at another middle class bias. So too, the National Childbirth Trust comes with perceived and real middle class connotations in terms of membership. Indeed, one NCT member tells us, only half jokingly that ‘Everyone knows [joining the NCT] is a way to pay a reasonable amount of money to meet other nice middle-class parents’ (Yee 2013). Although it is easy to mock economically advantaged parents who, in no particular order, buy a Bugaboo, join Mumsnet, order the Boden maternity range and sign up for NCT classes, the more serious issue here is that ‘a two-tier antenatal system is emerging, where less well-off women have little access to the advice and support so crucial for first-time mothers’ (Rock 2011). After all, ‘new figures show that there has been a boom in the number of women paying around £200 to attend a course of private NCT sessions – a jump from 25,000 in 2005/6 to 40,000 in 2010/11 – while the provision of free NHS classes in austerity Britain is increasingly patchy’ (ibid.).

There is unquestionably a middle class bias to many of the organisations that I have spoken to about the project, and yet I have tried to counter this by spending time talking to a more diverse range of mothers at Children’s Centres and informal play meetings around the South West region. These were not formal interviews and no set questionnaire or schedule was followed; indeed, I was attending these sessions as a mother with young children during a period of maternity leave, weaving my research interests into numerous conversations about motherhood more generally. It was not my aim to observe these mothers nor to note their parenting strengths or strategies, but rather, to talk to them in a comfortable environment about the mothers who they watch on television, their reasons for watching these figures and any demonstrable links between those images and what they see as their own childcare practices. I was entirely open about my research project and was upfront about my interest in talking to them about the topic of motherhood and the media; my aim in visiting these organised play sessions was simply to speak to a myriad of mothers in a conversational way in a natural and comfortable setting so as to elicit their responses beyond the questionnaire. One might suggest that this informal technique should

take the form of the dominant methodological approach for this research due to the personable nature of the questioning, but balancing the maternal role with relevant questioning proved more difficult than expected. In order to appear as a maternal ally rather than what Everingham refers to as a 'detached outsider' (1994) it was important to attend these groups as a mother with young children, but the reality of attending a playgroup with those who actually want to play means that you cannot fully focus on adult conversations, let alone academic questioning. In this same way, women's responses, although generous, were not given serious thought or consideration as their attentions were divided here. In my experiences then, talking to mothers in an informal play setting was an incredibly valuable exercise that provided meaningful responses, but, as Everingham and others who not only observe play activities, but who actually go as far as joining in with such activities tell us, it is not always possible for either researcher or respondent to commit fully to the conversation (1994). Although this may be less of a problem for some studies, I was interested in getting these mothers to think about their television viewing in a way that they have perhaps not done so previously, and as such, an ability to fully focus on the conversation would have proved fruitful here. Therefore, while Everingham followed up her playgroup observations with more formal semi-structured interviews, I looked to the questionnaire in order to secure relevant and meaningful data for this research.

That said, although I was initially concerned about the middle class bias to this research in terms of where I presented my questionnaire and how I sought to gather information from respondents, the responses that I have received demonstrate a reasonably balanced demographic in terms of age, ethnicity, employment and family structure.

In terms of presenting the words, thoughts and voices of the mothers who generously took the time to read and respond to my questions, in many cases, at length and in great detail, to make it clear where their words are being presented, these sections will be in italics throughout the volume, with comments from blogs, reviews, and other social media networking sites appearing without this change to type. In terms of expression, I will change typos and small grammatical errors merely for the sake of clarity and coherence for the reader, with no intention of changing the sense of

engagement or argument. Where text speak, or mumsnet abbreviations are used, I have again made small amendments to these responses. I am aware that mumsnet offers a useful overview of routine and recurring acronyms for uninitiated readers ranging from AFAIK (as far as I know) to YABOS (you are being over sensitive) with talk of DS (Darling/Dear Son) and DDs (Darling/Dear Daughter) being commonly used within each thread (mumsnet 2014b), I would not expect readers to have to decode the reader responses with a mumsnet manual, rather, I am aiming for clarity and coherence for all readers. And it is to these responses that I now turn.

