

*The cruel masses:*  
How producers at a Swedish commercial television production  
company construct their viewers

Katarina Graffman, Ph D

Departement of Cultural Anthropology  
Uppsala University  
Trädgårdsgatan 18  
S-753 09 Uppsala  
Sweden

Phone: +46 (0)18 471 22 85

Fax: +46 (0)18 471 70 28

[katarina.graffman@culturelab.se](mailto:katarina.graffman@culturelab.se)

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## Abstract

This anthropological study explores how producers at a Swedish commercial production company communicate with the unknown masses. Within the TV institutions' code, *the average person* labels an audience, while the 'reference person' is someone embodying this model, someone that the producer knows. The ratings will confirm if the prefiguring through the use of the reference person was correct. The knowledge about and experience from the TV institution enabling the producers to 'feel what is right' as, finally, they become viewers functioning as surrogate audience members. Qualitative research methods, here ethnographic fieldwork, provide evidence to suggest that the construction of the viewer is a viewer that after mediation goes from a statistical figure to a person with characteristics reminiscent of the producer.

## *The cruel masses*

After spending nine months of extended fieldwork at one of the largest commercial television production company in Stockholm, Sweden, referred to as Meter, I found that the producers very seldom mention the recipient, the audience, in their daily work. The work of the production company is based on the notion of an existing audience 'out there' which actually views the programs that the company produces. This article describes the way in which the producer relates to this "already existing" audience: how do the producers behave toward the viewers, create a relationship with them and attempt to ensure the endurance of that relationship. The strategies used by the producers to create an image of and establish a relationship to the audience include the construction of *the average person* based on statistical figures, reference persons, viewer ratings and general knowledge of the TV institution, experience of earlier shows and of themselves as surrogate viewers (cf. Espinosa 1982:85). These strategies are a result of the producers' habitus and of the social circumstances they encounter in the field of television production, which hopefully lead to 'a feeling for what is right'. The conception of the audience is decisive for how the producers make their choices and formulate the programs' content and approach. Through the created image of the audience, the masses can be individualized and the TV medium's specific communicative

character, i.e. that the approach shall be individual despite the address of a mass audience (Scannell 1996:11), established.

In her book *Desperately Seeking the Audience*, Ien Ang writes that the TV audience is not ‘the innocent reflection of a given reality’ (1991:35), but rather a discursive construct that becomes “known” through statistical figures. Ang speaks in her studies of the industrial machinery of viewer ratings, and examines how large, culture-manufacturing institutions produce viewer analyses for the creation of discursive constructions to facilitate various market decisions. I will focus below on the particular producers’ ways of seeking and constructing their audience. It is the producers who are ‘the conduits of corporate ideologies’ (Dornfeld 1998:13). In order to hold myself to the discursive constructions – the audience, target group, *the average person* and so on – I use a meta-expression that I will refer to as audience conceptions. The term ‘audience’ I will maintain throughout as a discursive construction rather than a reality.

This article offers an insight into a commercial production company, which acts in a TV system with a considerable heritage of public service. The observed production company produces programs both for the Swedish public service television as well as for the commercial channels. In order to situate the arguments in this article an overview of the Swedish TV system needs to be presented.

### **The TV system in Sweden**

In 1956 the official broadcasting started in Sweden by a public service company, today named Sveriges Television (SVT). A public service company was a company in the interest of the public; this included both the society and the general public. The television where not supposed to act for self-winning but in the service of society. Through this television system the society could be modernized and democratized - one of the main missions was to make political questions and different viewpoints available to the citizens. Another important task was to protect and strengthen the multiplicity and variation represented in Swedish society. Easier programs like quiz shows, popular music and artist performances were connected with commercialism and the television would as far as possible mediate a broad and non-commercial culture (Edin 2000:65). The system was financed through license-fees.

From 1956 until the end of the seventies, the public service company was the only broadcaster in Sweden, regarding radio and television. But arguments for commercial television existed since the start. The business industry and advertisers were instigators to this discussion. One of the stronger arguments for commercial television was to encourage

competition. The social democrats decided that it was time to increase the system, not in favor for a commercial broadcaster, but for a second public service channel which started broadcast in 1969. By this decision one hoped to gain the advantages of concurrence, competition between the two channels would lead to better programs and more programs, but be able to avoid the disadvantages, commercials and the chasing of viewers. The two-channel system reinforced the public service company, and the commercial interests that threatened the monopoly were for a while warded off. Through the internal competition, the public service broadcaster could practice and learn how different programs and scheduling affected the viewers.

The monopoly started to break up in 1978 when the company's exclusive right to radio- and television broadcasting were abolished and commercial radio introduced. In 1985 satellite television were broadcasted by cable. Sky Channel was one of the first commercial channels the Swedes could watch. In 1987 the first Swedish commercial channel was introduced, TV3, broadcasted from London by cable.

First in 1991 a commercial TV broadcaster was granted a concession to send in the terrestrial net. The commercial company TV4 started their transmissions in 1992. The program outcome was regulated through an agreement with the government saying that TV4 must send diversified programs of high quality. The main difference compared to the public service agreement, is that TV4 has no obligation to send to minority groups. The construction of TV4, the hybrid channel "commercial public service", meant that the government could keep the control. This was a way to open up the monopoly and at the same time protect public service. The commercial channel TV3 continued their transmissions from London and ZTV, TV6 and Channel 5 together with several pay-TV channels were broadcasted through cable. In 2001 seventy percent of the Swedish households had access to satellite-TV and among seventy channels to choose among. The average TV-viewing time is two hours and twenty-eight minutes distributed quite equal between the public service two channels (62 minutes), TV4 (42 minutes) and other commercial channels (44 minutes). All channels in Sweden transmit programs produced by independent producers, as well as they make in-house productions.

A legacy from public service television affects the TV industry to produce more of educational programs, than "glitter and glamour" studio shows. The producers at Meter maintain that TV programs must be "good" and "qualitative". TV production thus involves something more than just supplying the channels with those programs they demand and attracting the desired target group. A large number of the programs produced by Meter were

spoken of in terms of *public education*. The public-educator ideal that has been a reason for the public service channel's authority and legitimacy has come to be an important component of the television Meter produces. Meter has adapted its production according to the field's conditions and limitations and is an "expert" doing light, fact-based programs; they produce "real" television, which they deem public education.

### **TV for the average person**

The goal for public service television in Sweden has been to reach "half the population" (the Swedish population consists of approximately 9 million citizen), compared to more specific target groups in for example an American context. This means that the target group needs to be broadly defined. The commercial channels specify their choice of programming in order to make it reach certain target groups, or conversely, so that the choice of program attracts those viewers who are interesting for the advertisers. In a Swedish context, with a relatively small range of TV channels and program alternatives, it is the channels very similar definition "ages 20-44" that dominates. Actors within the TV production field say they produce television for "the average person", a Swedish equivalent of 'Joe Average' or 'Mr. Smith'.

The producers at Meter have a rather similar definition of this character type. It is only small details that distinguish one producer's definition from that of another. The following quotations reflect six producer's descriptions of *the average person*:

The average person is a '*Bingolotto* sort' who doesn't live in the city, has three children when they are about twenty-five years old, works as a nurse's assistant and doesn't earn much money. They aren't very well off at all. (Female producer)

The average person is a person who represents a taste common to very many, those who choose the expected – a dachshund instead of a greyhound. (Female producer)

A person who goes out dancing on Saturday or watches *Bingolotto* and has a black leather sofa. A person who works as a nurse's assistant, has two kids, and at some point during the week does aerobics and diets. (Female producer)

You know, the average person is those people who stand in line for hours in a mall to buy a whole shopping cart full of 'cheap' stuff. That's who we are producing for. (Experienced male producer)

The average person is not necessarily the world's most intelligent creature, but involved. It's not the sort who hangs out in the pub but rather one who lives out in the country. (Experienced male producer)

It's the viewer who sits there in front of the TV with a few kids, a beer and chips watching *Bingolotto* on Saturday. (Male producer)

'Average' is above all defined by means of three criteria: one which has to do with choice of program and two which are related to standard of living – where the viewer lives and what he or she earns. All three can be obtained through the analysis of viewer ratings. When the producers talk about which program *the average person* chooses to watch, the program *Bingolotto*, which is a game show that is broadcast during Saturday prime hours on the commercial station TV4, is by far the most commonly named. *The average person* is said to live 'in the country', not 'within the city limits' of Stockholm. *The average person* has a mid-range income or lower. These three descriptions create a clear distinction between *the average person* and the producers themselves. No producer watches *Bingolotto*. If one of them has seen the program the experience is described as a happening or as 'an attempt to understand *the average person*'. The majority of producers at the production company live in central Stockholm, or in the high-status areas outside the downtown, and the majority are born and raised there. The producers themselves have high income. Based on these three criteria, the producers cannot be said to produce television for the group to which they themselves belong. *The average person* is thus, in the producers' officially formulated definitions, someone different from the producers themselves.

The stereotypical description, the official definition, of *the average person* is first of all of strategic significance in facilitating communication within the TV institution. It is an easy way to generalize and thereby facilitate communication between producers and between other agents in the field. By referring to *the average person*, one invokes a construction that everyone in the business is familiar with. A female editor with an interest in statistics points out that it is not a matter of prejudice, but rather of simplification:

Is it prejudiced to say that people buy chips and watch TV? From a purely statistical perspective it's true that people buy more chips than fruit. One has to learn from statistics. People want to have leather couches, is that bad though? To say that this is prejudice is the same as equating it with being bad. I don't think that one needs to make

value judgments about people's habits, if people like to spend the weekend watching videos and eating chips there's nothing wrong with that. We're all different. What I think is boring, on the other hand, is that many TV people have such poor knowledge of 'the masses'. They simply know far too little about the viewers.

*The average person* is a synonym for the kind of viewer that the producers need to attract. The etiquette *average* gives the agents within the TV production field a feeling that this person is real. The definitions describing *the average person* were repeated like a memorized mantra. A number of producers maintain that these descriptions are not prejudiced. Instead, one puts an effort in talking about the average person and its programmatic choices in a liberal sense; if two million viewers choose a docusoap 'there is nothing wrong with that'.

### **The reference person**

With the start of a new program a relationship to the intended audience must be established. During the production process, the producers make use of several strategies for the establishment of this relationship, as well as for maintaining it. The construction *the average person* is a strategy that does more to facilitate the communication within the TV institution than help the producers to build up a perception of the viewers. Two strategies that the producers themselves name as being useful are the reference person/persons and viewer ratings, here referred to as the *first* and *second meeting* with the viewer.

The first meeting is a hypothetical meeting that takes place during the first phase of the production process, when one works out the program idea. The producer, or the group working to formulate the program's or the series' content and form, a group which may, for example, consist of the producer, editor and in most cases the channel's executive producer/project leader, defines the intended viewer and discusses how the program needs to look in order to attract that viewer. The definition is drawn from the channel's target group and is accordingly undetailed and vague, but the result of this meeting affects the editorial work during the whole production process. How should the content, form and approach look in order to attract the intended viewer? Several different aspects are taken into consideration. The content must be correctly timed; if one does a segment on grills in a feature program, it cannot be broadcast in autumn but must rather appear during grill season. If ordinary people should be a part of the program, they must be able to represent the specified viewer definition. In addition, careful consideration is given to whom will be chosen as program host, if one is to be present in the program. This person must be of the right age and style. The manner in

which a female program host should be dressed in order to attract the intended viewer was discussed at a meeting of producers. A female producer was of the opinion that the program host should wear ‘ordinary clothes’, i.e. not be too trendy and dressed up, and thereby create a closer relationship to *the average person*, while a male producer resolutely stressed that the program host needs to ‘be a joy to the eye of the average person, a person who isn’t exactly grand.’

Creating this relationship with the viewer demands knowledge about who *the average person* really is. For the producer this knowledge is essentially equivalent to statistics, in this case knowledge of the average values in Swedish society. These statistics, as discussed earlier, are largely non-existent among the majority of producers. On the grounds of weak knowledge a conception of the viewer is built. Even to be able to establish an image of the intended viewer, all producers have one, two or several *reference persons* in mind when producing whom they later, if the reference person is an accessible and physical person, sometimes ask for an opinion about the program. The reference persons can be relatives, often siblings or cousins whose age matches that of the target group being produced for, or neighbors at the producer’s summer residence, *the average person* in the country. Some producers say that they blend several ‘average people’ together into a single mix. Thus the reference person is someone one knows well, especially when he or she represents a cousin, someone the producer knows, the neighbor at the summer residence, or a completely fictitious person invented from stereotype expectations. These persons embody the masses and function as a sounding board in the producer’s thoughts when producing his or her program – the producer takes a hay straw from the haystack.

An experienced male producer says that he always uses his sister as a reference person, regardless of which channel he is producing for. His sister always fits, he says, since ‘she’s a simple person with simple habits.’ He describes his sister with the following: she lives in a suburb of Stockholm, is married and has two children, works at a school and watches between two and three hours of TV every evening. Due to the fact that the channels’ target groups correspond to one another it is normal that the producers have only one or two people as models.

The producers claim not to know very many ‘average people’; the selected group is consequently highly limited. Some producers, above all those who grew up outside of Stockholm themselves, emphasize that if given the chance they take the time to speak with people they meet outside of the television environment, in shops and at restaurants, for example. In their experience, most people are extremely curious when they hear that someone

works in television production and they automatically begin talking about their experience with and opinion of the medium. These accounts are combined with the life stories and living habits of the reference persons.

A minority of producers, but above all co-workers who are not addressed as producers, do not think about the viewer in terms of reference persons at all. Balancing the budget, making sure that the editing works and getting the schedule to flow smoothly are parts of the TV production that are more tangible and immediate. If the budget is overstretched, the cooperation fails in the editing room or the schedule is not met, there will be no program, and above all, there will be no further advancement as a producer. A newly graduated female producer feels that she has no time to think about the viewer, because 'there are so many other things, like budgets, booking cameras, fixing sets... the viewer will be there anyway'.

Through the hypothetical assumption of what the reference persons would appreciate, understand and like, the producers make their choices. A program's success depends upon these assumptions being correct. If the producer and viewer do not share common frame of cultural references the program can be misperceived or misinterpreted, and if a program wants to have high viewer ratings it must be immediately understood and accepted by a large audience (cf. Kottak 1990:43). In other words, 'producers make cultural assumptions about their viewers' cultural assumptions about codes and their contexts' (Ruby 1992:195).

During the production process it is the reference person and the masses that alternately occupy the producer's thoughts. A female producer explains:

When I'm in the process of developing a program idea, the reference persons are the most prominent when deciding on the framework for the program. After intensive work these people are incorporated into one's thoughts. They're always there, diffuse in the back of one's mind somewhere. One gets one's questions answered so long as one is able to leave one's self and letting one's reference persons think. Then, in the editing phase, it's another sort of thinking that applies. Then I become more technical: color, form, title sequence, graphics, music. I think more about intelligibility. Is this feature intelligible, or does it go too fast, are my reference persons able to follow along. In this phase it's me, the producer, who studies the feature. This is difficult, since I'm so involved in every feature. It's hard to decide if it's comprehensible or not. It can be a trap. For example, it's a really tricky thing to decide which feature should be the program's lead-in, because it's the first feature that gets viewers to stay or flip to the next channel. When I decide which feature I want to start the program with I have to be brave enough to leave my reference persons and think about the masses instead: 'Sure,

the dad in the family likes cars, but does the larger part of the intended audience?’ Then come the viewer ratings. They’re a confirmation of whether one was thinking correctly in the editing room.

The second meeting with the viewer is the viewer ratings, which confirm whether or not the first hypothetical meeting and choice of reference persons has given the producer and the editing team the right angle of approach to the program, i.e. whether or not the approach and form have been successful and attracted many viewers within the right target group.

The female producer’s saying, mentioned above, ‘they’re a confirmation of whether one was thinking correctly’, shows how important the ratings are. The ratings are given a value that is not comparable to its real logical value, i.e. the only thing the ratings can show is that the producer did not produce so wrong that the result was negative. High ratings do not mean that a program can be judged as ‘good’ in any aesthetic sense.

### **The hidden god**

Viewer ratings together with statistical averages, create the discursive construction of the TV audience, which is a convenient material for supplying advertisers with information (Ang 1992:135). This means that the system measures which/how many people are *exposed* to the program, rather than which people actually *watch* the program. The information the system can deliver is exposure in relation to program (who sees what), program flux and the panel participants’ TV use. ‘It’s like performing surgery with an axe’, says an experienced male producer. The actual composition of the viewers and the actual manner of their viewing behavior is a factor of uncertainty.

The ratings resulting from the panel measurements are the foundation on which the entire TV enterprise is built, which implies the supposition that it is possible to establish an objective audience rating through the panel. The panel in Sweden consists of 1080 households. One male producer says that the ratings are merely an estimation, but that the TV industry has unanimously decided that they are the best ‘currency’: ‘Without a common currency we would not be able to do business’. The viewer ratings’ most essential function has to do with the calculation of advertisement costs, but they do not have a solely financial value. They also function as a measurement of quality (cf. Nielsen 1997, Syvertsen 1997).

The TV institution is completely dependent on the viewers and their ‘unforced appetite to continue watching day after day’ (Ang 1991:18). A male employee at TV4 feels that many within the TV institution have a poor conception of the audience: ‘They perceive it as an

erratic and slightly frightening abstraction, the cruel masses, always with the remote control in hand and ready to change the channel'. Enormous amounts of money and energy are spent in attracting the audience to the TV set – TV supplements, advertisements for new programs in the form of sneak previews, interviews with TV personalities and so on (Ellis 1982). The TV audience cannot be taken for granted and the fight for viewers is waged continuously. The TV4 employee continues:

It's true that many work with stereotypes for whom they imagine they are making programs. It's an old trick that we've inherited from the newspaper trade, where one has always imagined one's self as publishing a newspaper for a stereotype called 'Nisse in Hökarängen'. It's mostly a way to be able to discuss what the audience wants on some sort of general level. It's not a matter of contempt. Everyone with some level of insight realizes that contempt *for* the audience rather quickly turns around to become contempt *from* the audience. And TV audiences react directly, they simply change the channel when they don't like what they see. It's not the same as with newspapers, where the subscriber always gives the newspaper a chance at least until it's time to renew the subscription.

Viewer ratings confirm whether or not the viewers fall into the target group that the channel has put into focus. If a program has a million viewers - which is seen to be very good in a Swedish context - but 700,000 of them belong to the wrong target group, the producer has failed with the program because he or she has not produced the program that the channel paid for. Bourdieu speaks of viewer ratings as a 'hidden god' that determines the programming selection on television and creates a 'viewer ratings mentality' among all those in the trade, ensuring that one always thinks in terms of sales success (1998:40-43). Bourdieu's designation of viewer ratings as a hidden god is not perceived negatively by the producers at Meter, but rather quite the opposite. A female producer points out that it is 'natural to work within this god's universe'.

When a program has had its premiere, a tense atmosphere dominates among the editorial staff the day after as one waits for the viewer ratings. In hushed voices, the members of the editing team express how they perceived the program when they saw it 'for real' on the TV screen, in spite of the fact that they saw the program's content numerous times during the production process and consider the completed production to be good. Thus the ratings become known, often delivered by the executive producer of the channel.<sup>i</sup> The moment the ratings are known, euphoria breaks out if they are much better than had been expected, and

joy and relief if the ratings are at about the level that had been hoped for. A cheer of happy and relieved voices is heard and the editorial staff commends itself on having produced such a good program. Good ratings often mean that the editing team celebrates the success, for example with a cake. The work with the rest of the programs in the series continues unchanged. It is only small details that are occasionally discussed and modified. The editing team's self-confidence is boosted and the workers involved in the production spread the ratings about the company with pride and happiness.

If, on the other hand, the ratings are low, a disappointed, at times almost dejected mood spreads within the group and bitter comments are heard: 'We might as well cancel the crap'. The mood of disappointment takes hold regardless of whether it is one hundred thousand or three hundred thousand fewer viewers than estimated. One hundred thousand fewer viewers is naturally not as bad as three hundred thousand fewer, but given the dominant ratings fixation, the estimated number is seen as the zero-point and everything under it negative. Doors to the editing room are closed and the editorial staff members continue to work untiringly with the production. The poor ratings mean that the producer and the editing team must try to find explanations for the fact that there are so few viewers. The viewer ratings must be evaluated with regard to which channel broadcasts the program, the broadcast time slot, which program was broadcast prior the one in question (lead-in or flow), how the marketing of the program was done and competition from other channels, which is measured by the share of viewer time.<sup>ii</sup> One scrutinizes everything from schedule placement to what the program host was wearing. If a program does not receive the expected ratings, the editing team and the producer's perception of the content waver; a feature that was previously seen to be good suddenly comprises multiple weaknesses. If it is possible to find a reason for the ratings being low, the mood of disappointment gradually eases. Some producers and other editing team members take a different strategy and regret that so few chose to watch a program that is so good, and express hopes that the viewers will find their way to the program by next week when the series continues its broadcast. The true proof of whether one has managed to produce a program that many will watch does not come until a number of programs in the series have been shown. A new program must first be established so that viewers find their way to it, or better said, so that the right target group finds its way to it. A program series' first episode must therefore be very clearly profiled to the target group.

The day after a program is broadcast and the viewer ratings have been good, urgent e-mail to all employees of the production company is sent, in which it is most often the producer who speaks proudly about how high the ratings were and sometimes about the share of viewer

time. At times there is an element of competition over the ratings of the different ongoing productions at the production company:

Program X broke all records yesterday. 475,000 viewers. The largest audience ever in TV3 history for a premiere program.

It was actually 490,000 and not 475,000. That's what they said at TV3 when I was there recently. Even better!

This week program Y had 1,330,00 viewers and a share of 46.6%! How about that! Very happy Y-people wish you a pleasant weekend!

If the ratings have been low, worse than expected, an e-mail is not sent to the whole company but only to the members of the editing team. A female producer expressed dissatisfaction with all of these messages about ratings: 'There is an incredible ratings hysteria that dominates here, I've never seen the like of it.... there are several e-mails every day with only figures'.

Receiving high viewer ratings is one of the 'kicks' that producers talk about when they describe why it is enjoyable to work with television. A male producer says that it is dizzying, especially when the ratings are higher than those of both the program before and after the program in question. This is his proof that the viewers chose to watch his specific program, rather than simply ending up there.

In the second meeting with the viewer it is not only the ratings that confirm the audience's reaction to a production. There can also be more direct contact with the viewers through responses via letters, e-mail and telephone calls. A male producer begins every morning by checking to see whether letters or e-mails have been sent to the editing team by viewers: 'All viewer response delights me.' He admits to feeling that he does not know the audience at all and it is through this response that he believes he gets some sort of concept of viewer opinion. At the same time, he points out that those who make contact are not representative of *the average person*, because they get involved more than usual and are often 'a bit crazy'. Another male producer believes that this viewer response is largely worthless since it is not 'ordinary people' who get involved and make contact with the production company but rather those who are 'a little nutty, often retirees who don't have anything else to do.'<sup>iii</sup> TV digests and reviews in newspapers are also of great importance. Even if one officially says that those who review cannot possibly represent *the average person* and do not, therefore, have a

valuable opinion, good reviews are satisfying. These are carefully clipped out and posted on bulletin boards, or taped to the editing room's glass walls with the text facing outwards so that passersby cannot avoid this official confirmation.

### **Programs that make it with the masses – broad codes and small surprises**

The producers mean that a skillful producer needs an ability to 'feel what is right'. This feeling comprises two things: in part being able to sense general trends, values and opinions in society, i.e. everyday cultural experience, and in part 'feeling' the desired target group.

I trust that my feeling and intuition is right. The professional aspect is being able to adjust one's production to the right target group. Lots of people can make TV but not everyone can fit their ideas to the right target group, and that's a matter of *feeling*.  
(Female producer)

A competent and skillful producer should feel his or her viewers, or in other words have an ability to know what will be accepted and made popular by the masses. According to the producers themselves, this should be a part of the craft of TV production: they learn through experience what will be popular. An experienced male producer says that nowadays, after ten years in the trade, he can almost always guess what a program's ratings will be. 'It's like engineering', he maintains, and notes that it is enough to see a program's title sequence to decide if the show will be a viewer success or not. Todd Gitlin talks about this "feeling" as the professional's claim to privileged status: "a personal quality gained from experience and grafted onto the principles and practices of the profession, a mystery that permits him or her to make right judgements under difficult practical circumstances" (Gitlin 1994:22).

The majority of producers take it as their mission to deliver broad codes. Fiske maintains that broad codes are codes which are common to a 'mass audience'; they are simple and immediately pleasing, and no 'education' is necessary to understand them (1990:103). The vague target group definitions demand broad program forms. A talented producer knows which feelings, events and trends are currently important. In this way, the programs go back to their source, *the average person*, and strengthen these patterns of thought and feeling, establishing a cooperation between producer and viewer. A successful program can then function as a model for many other programs produced according to the same structures.

However, the producers maintain that an important ingredient in successful TV production is the element of surprise. The formula for successful programs is to build on structures the

viewer recognizes, which creates security. The broad codes, which are shared by a mass audience, are immediately accepted and recognized as they appeal to the viewers' common social values (Fiske 1990:103), but it is surprise that wets the appetite. The producers feel that their creativity and originality can be expressed in the formation of the unexpected in the program. Here there is space for TV creation that is not completely steered by the commercial framework. The contributions, perhaps simply a different color on a program host's trousers, a different camera angle or a current joke told by the program host, are often nothing planned in advance but rather ideas that are implemented during shooting. The responsible representative for the channel is most often unaware of these ideas and contributions – hence the feeling of freedom from the commercial train of thought – but almost always expresses approval when he or she sees the result.

It is through surprise that conventions and broad codes can be broken and it is these elements, the producers maintain, that determine whether or not viewers will like a program. *The average person* is to a greater extent a representative for the audience in the production of the broad codes than in the unexpected features, the producers say. In those features or image sequences designed to get 'the viewer moving', to astonish or cause reflection, the producer in many cases puts himself or herself, or colleagues, in the role of intended viewer. The producers strive to create these unexpected features because one knows that the viewers, *the average person*, appreciate these elements of surprise and it is these features that make a program popular.

### **The producer as viewer**

The reference persons are for many producers just as removed as the large audience, which means that instead, and often unconsciously, one uses one's self or those in one's social circle as intended viewers. The experienced producers maintain that the ideal producer should be able to think beyond himself or herself, and beyond his or her social circle, but for the majority this is very difficult. The reference person helps some producers to come nearer to the masses, to give them a face, but it is difficult to conduct a dialog with someone that one does not know. Herbert J. Gans, who studied American journalists, is of the opinion that the journalists write and film for their superiors and for themselves based on the supposition that what interests them will also be of interest to the audience (1979:230). Dornfeld means that it is necessary during the production process for the producer to act as a surrogate audience member for that which he or she is producing. In this way the producer can have an opinion about the material used to create a program (1992:238). According to Dornfeld, the producer

can function as a surrogate for his or her own audience members because the producer is also a member of the audience; he or she watches TV during free time and lives a similar life to them. This applies to all cultural producers, regardless of their sphere of activities. Bourdieu means that the items produced ‘in both style and content...bear the marks of their authors’ socially constituted dispositions (that is, their social origins, retranslated as a function of the positions in the field of production which these dispositions played a large part in determining)’ (Bourdieu 1984:20). The producers are a part of the reality they create. The producer *is* the viewer. Their subjective experiences and interpretations are mirrored in their work. The books they read, the news they see, the newspapers they subscribe to and the TV programs their families choose to watch, are examples of factors that contribute to the determination of ‘socially constituted dispositions’. To say that the producer is a viewer implies seeing the producer as an interpreting agent who decodes cultural forms, both the forms that he or she produces and the forms that he or she consumes in private life, through the experiential framework of taste, preference and experience. Naturally, the producers make use of conventional and specialized expressions and practices that are customized to the specific TV production logic, which is not ‘attributable to a conventional audience member’ (Dornfeld 1998:16). The producer is a viewer, but a viewer under very specific conditions.

When looking at the program, the producers use different lenses depending on the stage in the production process – they alternate in roles as producer and viewer. Many producers at the production company assert that one looks at what one produces as a craftsperson, not as a viewer. This applies above all to the early stages where the producer scrutinizes the craft of sound, editing, music, camera angles and so on. In the final stages, when the producer looks at the more or less finished program, he or she attempts to watch as a viewer, ‘to make one’s self a little stupid’, as one female producer expressed it, and ask what the viewer will comprehend. The producers feel that it is a part of the craft to view as a viewer when a producer functions as a surrogate audience. One male producer feels that, in the end, he must rely on himself as a viewer and let his gut feeling guide his choices. Another male producer speaks of ‘the old sofa trick’. He notes his own behavior on the sofa in front of the TV set. Which forms and messages, which content gets him to straighten his back and lean forward? ‘If the body doesn’t physically react, the TV producer in me must wonder why’, he explains. An experienced male producer cannot see himself as part producer and part viewer. He produces only those program forms that he himself chooses to watch – he is the viewer during the whole production process.

An experienced female producer spoke about how she felt like an *average person* in her work, like one of the viewers in the desired target group. She relies on herself as a viewer during the entire production process: ‘What do I know, what do I want to learn, what do I like’. She claims to be very close to her viewers:

There are a lot of average people, in some ways... somehow.... I could argue that I’m an average person. When I’m producing I think that I represent a lot of people and then... It’s more a matter of feeling, really, that I think that... I think very much so... it’s a matter of... how can I explain this so that it doesn’t sound so wishy-washy. I can take an example from the program *Finally Home*. If I’m supposed to do a feature in that program, if I think that flowery and red is pretty, then I think a lot of other people think that... I *know* that people like it because it speaks to the heart, it’s something warm and sensitive, so then I try to have an influence. It doesn’t have to be flowers and red but it should be that feeling instead of black and white. Black and white don’t reach many people. Everybody has different tastes, it’s a matter of getting to something else... (the producer places her hand on her heart) something found here. I think that... it’s what I call my intuition that I follow when I produce and think about content.

A certain pattern can be discerned between experienced producers and those less experienced. Those with solid production experience take a shy position and maintain in interviews that they ‘watch too little TV’ to be able to function as a viewer. For them it is a matter of having ‘the right feeling’, which means there is no need to act as a viewer. The younger, less experienced producers are more sure of themselves and believe that it is the producer who passes final judgment on a program or feature – as a viewer. At the same time, it is the producers with more experience, males as well as females, who sometimes express a solidarity with and understanding of the viewers. They find no loss of prestige in saying that they sometimes feel like this *average person*. But, the common opinion among all producers at the production company is that there is a distinct difference between the ones who produce and the ones who consume.

*The average person* does not correspond to the producers’ lifestyles. The only thing that is the same is age, which is what the majority of producers openly speak of as a likeness between themselves and the construction of the viewer. On the whole, everyone at the production company is in the 20-44 age range. The fact that the producers name the program *Bingolotto* when they define the average person can be seen as contradictory if one studies the actual viewer ratings. A ratings analyst at the commercial channel TV4, observes that the

*Bingolotto* audience is largely comprised of older viewers, those over forty. *Bingolotto*'s 'typical viewer' is described as 'a seventy-year-old lady in a small town in the countryside'. The program does not fit in with TV4's target group, whose definition was given as the basis for the construction the average person. Rather, it is the programs produced by Meter that correspond to the channel's target group definition. The typical viewer of a feature program named *Finally Home* is described as 'a family with children residing in a suburb in their own house'. This means that the officially stated definition of the average person does not work in relation to the analytical tools that are, in fact, the basis for the definition. The producers state *Bingolotto* as a definition criterion, but the average person targeted by the Meter-produced programs corresponds to a greater degree with the producers themselves. The producers' and audience's common frame of cultural references come to the surface. The public service channel SVT analyzed TV4's feature program due to its huge popularity with the viewers. A male producer sent e-mail to all of the employees at the production company informing them of this analysis. SVT had come to the conclusion that the approach of the program was especially successful. The producer wrote:

We speak to the viewer in a way that SVT has never managed. SVT suffers from the fact that, although everyone is behind them, they are so completely fascinated by the fact that they can talk to the whole nation at once that they actually do it. We speak directly to the viewer. Another conclusion that SVT makes is that the editors behind the program are all part of the target group. So let's pat each other on the back and think about how great we are. We deserve it!

An explanation of the success of the Meter-produced programs is consequently 'that the editors behind the program are all part of the target group'. To be able to formulate a message to an unknown viewer, the producer must draw from his or her own habitus, or in other words 'the universalizing mediation by which practices of individual agents, without intent, become 'sensible' and 'reasonable', producing the common-sense world and its practices' (Roe 1987:19).

By contemplating the producer as a viewer, it is possible to understand the producer's actions and choices based in the same realms of interpretation, or as Giddens puts it, in a 'communal framework of reality' (1991:49), with the actual audience. The producer and the audience share frame of references, making decoding possible. In this sense, production and consumption are not as separate as the encoding/decoding tradition suggests. Rather, the

producers *create* a division between producer/consumer. Through this created division the TV producing agents officially emphasize a distance to *the average person*, but in more unofficial contexts they express a nearness to this etiquette person.

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<sup>i</sup> A channel with a healthy economy receives the viewer ratings for the previous day on a daily basis. The production company buys weekly delivery, as it is substantially cheaper.

<sup>ii</sup> Share of viewer time indicates how many switched-on TV sets were tuned in to a specific program. Share of viewer time, or share as it is called in the trade, is most interesting at a channel level. If, for example, TV4 has a 28% share, it means that 28% of the time that Swedes spend watching TV is spent watching TV4. Share is a unit of measurement for competition between channels. On the program level, share is uninteresting because it is not a unit of measurement for a specific program's success.

<sup>iii</sup> Philip Schlesinger, who studied news journalism at the BBC (1987), makes a similar statement: viewers who make contact are regarded as sick, instable and hysterical.