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Audience retrospection as a source of historiography: Oral history interviews on early television experiences

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Abstract

This article argues that oral history interviews constitute an invaluable source for reconstructing audience experiences of television in the past. Taking into account the limitations of human memory, as well as the constructive, structuring activities involved in 'memory work', these narratives provide useful, first-hand insights into the significance of television for audiences of the past. Starting from a discussion of audience historiography and the position therein of 'popular memory' and oral history, the article then draws on research about early Flemish TV audiences to discuss the multiple structures and connections to the present and to personal biography in television memories. Overall, the strength of this method lies not in the accuracy of these memories, but in their testimony of the lived experience and significance of television in everyday life.

Keywords

Audience research, fiction, flanders, oral history, television

If the past is a foreign country (Lowenthal, 1985), then media audiences of the past are like foreigners: vaguely familiar yet markedly different and hard to grasp. While media artefacts or policies of the past mostly linger on in some material form, past audience responses are ephemeral and volatile. Writing audience history, then, becomes a hazardous affair. However, not including audience history in media history, focusing only on what is materially safeguarded, entails the risk of misinterpreting the uses and meanings of media. As argued by Anderson and Curtin (2002: 17), media are not given facts but

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social productions, defined and redefined through use. Therefore, what we need is a cultural history of media, written 'from below', considering media 'as the products of a collective social engagement, a struggle for definition involving not only powerful institutions but also each of us who uses media technologies or encounter radio and TV programs in our daily lives' (Anderson and Curtin, 2002: 18). Therefore, they argue for historical explorations of the social and cultural, everyday contexts in which media were used in the past.

If, overall, audience research constitutes the least-developed field of media history, this is partly due to the relative scarcity of sources, as I will develop below, and partly to the precarious nature of those sources as representations of elusive and scattered audiences, as argued by Bourdon elsewhere in this issue. At the same time, any historical account of media which excludes its audiences is incomplete. Institutional histories may disclose media structures, policies and intentions; analysis of media products may disclose evolutions in their content, form and representations, but none of these analyses provide sufficient insights into past media uses and interpretations. The long and rich history of media audience research has taught us how unpredictable and varied media uses and interpretations are; how audiences are partly, but not completely, determined by institutional and textual constraints, and how personal, social, historical and cultural contexts all interfere in the uses and 'decodings' of media images and representations. To understand these uses, then, we need reliable guides. Even if audience members themselves are not always reliable, as will be elaborated below, I would argue that it is essential to include their first-hand accounts, among other sources.

This article discusses the use and value of oral history interviews as a source of audience history. While focusing on a particular geographic context (Flanders, Belgium), medium (television) and even genre (fiction), the aim is mostly to reflect more generally on the methodological and epistemological presuppositions and implications of oral history interviews as a tool for audience research. Drawing on the Flemish context, first the patchy history of TV audiences is discussed. Then, oral history is presented as a method to fill the gaps in our knowledge of the past, reflecting on its strengths but also on its problems and challenges. Reviewing some academic oral audience histories, some of the strengths and weaknesses of this method are illustrated. Finally, I take a critical look back at the oral history interviews I used to study TV viewing in Flanders, systematically discussing mnemonic patterns and their epistemological consequences, illustrating how audience memories, however, fragmented and reconstructed, do tell us a lot about the past. Overall, I would argue that, indeed, oral history can enrich our understanding, not only of processes of remembering but also of the past, provided that one remains aware of the partial and constructive nature of audience memories, and that other historical sources are used to frame and corroborate these memories.

Flemish audience historiography

In view of the multiplicity of potential audiences, this account is restricted to the audiences of one particular medium, television, arguably the most important mass medium of the second half of the 20th century. Television audiences have been discussed widely in academic research internationally, using a variety of methods, but most of this research

focuses on the present. Although audience behaviour is increasingly measured and captured by the industry itself, the interest of such research is predominantly instrumental. Past patterns of television use quickly lose their interest value, unless as a benchmark for present and future uses.

Take the example of Flanders, the Northern Dutch-language community in Belgium. With a population of about 6.35 million inhabitants, it is a relatively small region which, however, has a broad range of media oriented towards the Dutch-speaking Belgians, a situation which is paralleled in the south of the country by French-language media. From its start in 1953, Flemish television was organized separately from its French-language counterpart, although both initially belonged to the same federal Belgian public service broadcasting institution, the NIR/INR (Nationaal Belgisch Instituut voor Radio-omroep). In 1960, the Flemish broadcaster BRT (Belgische Radio en Televisie, Nederlandse uitzendingen) became a separate entity within the NIR/INR and from 1977, it became an autonomous institution, paralleling the overall cultural division of the country as well as the generally split and monolingual media spheres on both sides of the language border (Dhoest, 2004; Saeys, 2007).

While media history is an extremely small field in Flanders, television has always taken a prominent position within it, due to the central position of Public Service Broadcasting (PSB) in Flemish society. However, much writing on the history of Flemish television is journalistic or autobiographical, by journalists and television personnel looking back on the past in an essayistic and anecdotal style (e.g. Bal, 1985; for an overview, see Dhoest and Van den Bulck, 2007). Taking a closer look at TV audience histories, the field further narrows. Overall, most academic writing on Flemish television focuses on its institutional aspects: the legal framework and regulations for the monopolistic public broadcaster (operating alone until 1989), and the corresponding internal organization of the broadcasting organization, with a particular focus on the entanglement of broadcasting and politics (e.g. Burgelman, 1990; Dhoest and Van den Bulck, 2007). This is partly related to a certain view on legitimate history, prioritizing views 'from above' (i.e. those of legislators and broadcasting officials), but also partly to the safeguarding of official documents in broadcasting archives and reports, while other documents were not systematically archived in the early decades (Burgelman and Goyvaerts, 1999). This, in turn, reflects a wider problem in television historiography: the scarcity and limited accessibility of certain archival sources, which are preselected according to criteria generally not known to the researcher (Corner, 2003: 277).

Flemish television audiences have rarely been analysed from a historical perspective, with the notable exception of Joke Bauwens (2007), who provides a chronological overview of the relations between PSB and its audiences. The early years of broadcasting are particularly hard to reconstruct from an audience point of view, as institutional audience research only started in 1969. For the earlier years, the only available sources are secondary: reflections and recollections by journalists and broadcasting personnel, and surveys by (television) magazines and annual reports by the broadcaster. From 1969, audience measurements by the PSB research department provided a more detailed and reliable account of audience behaviour and appreciations. Using a diary system drawing on a panel of 1500 people over the age of 12, ratings and market shares were calculated, while programmes were also assessed on a 5-point scale of appreciation (BRT-Studiedienst, 1988).

Reviewing the field, our knowledge of Flemish television viewers from the past is very patchy, restricted mostly to indirect, anecdotal, journalistic and subjective information before 1969, complemented by quantitative ratings and market shares as well as quantitative appreciation figures from 1969. Other sources, as described by Bourdon elsewhere in this issue, are available but remain to be explored. For instance, one could analyse 'elite' discourses about the audience as historical sources 'from above'. Similarly, insights 'from the side' could be drawn from the analysis of contemporary secondary material such as magazines and advertisements, which could be used to reconstruct the intertextual context of and discourses about early television, following the example of Spigel (1992).

However, such work, although extremely valuable, could only indirectly tell us how actual audiences dealt with television, as Spigel (1992: 186) admits, adding that such a history is necessarily a 'patchwork' that must 'draw together a number of approaches and perspective in the hopes of achieving a partial picture of past experiences' (p. 187). In this patchwork, I would argue, it is necessary also to include the voices and opinions of audience members themselves, however partial and retrospective these may be. As developed by Bourdon, in this issue, audiences as a historical object are hard to conceptualize and they are partly discursive constructions, but they should not be reduced to mere texts. Audiences may indeed be constructs, discourses and representations (by the industry, researchers, the press, ...), but they are also actual people whose experiences and recollections are essential in understanding 'actual' (if not directly accessible) media uses in the past.

Oral audience histories

As first-hand qualitative accounts of audience experiences were rarely collected in the early years of broadcasting, audience memories constitute one of the few ways to reconstruct such experiences. Over the past decades, several historical accounts of different media have been based on such audience memories. For instance, Jackie Stacey's (1998) historical exploration of Hollywood cinema was not based on textual analysis but on audience letters which were considered as retrospective representations guided by processes of selection and construction. Similarly, Anette Kuhn (2002) presents her work on cinema memories as 'ethnohistorical enquiry', treating her oral history interviews as 'memory texts', active reconstructions of the past based on 'memory work', performances and discourses drawing on a set of discursive registers. While this does not lead her to consider the interviews as fiction, they clearly do constitute narratives, revealing collective imaginations (Kuhn, 2002: 1–11). For this reason, and in line with current usage in methodological literature, I will use the term 'narrators' rather than 'respondents' to refer to my interviewees (Bleyen and Van Molle, 2012). As will be developed below, these narrators interact with the interviewer in a particular research context, which further impacts on the work of reminiscing.

Oral history interviews with audience members have also been used to reconstruct memories of the introduction and early years of radio and television. For instance, in the British context, Moores (1988) discusses the position of early radio in everyday life, while O'Sullivan (1991) uses interviews to reconstruct 'viewing cultures' from the

1950s. He finds strong memories of the first contact with TV, which however are fragmented and tainted: 'Often sentimentalised and fragmented, what is remembered tends to function as a point of symbolic, biographical reference, representing some aspects of the difference perceived between identity or circumstances "then" and "now"' (O'Sullivan, 1991: 163). The introduction of television is remembered as a memorable and important event, which is however tainted by nostalgia for this period among the older interviewees. Bourdon (1995, 2003) and Hanot (2003) similarly find strong and fond memories about the early years of television respectively in France and French-language Belgium, while Van Zoonen and Wieten (1994) argue that, on the contrary, the arrival of television was not perceived as an important change in Dutch family life. Instead of interviews, Kortti and Mähönen (2009) use written reminiscences to discuss Finnish television memories, and they find important national particularities in the interaction between television use and family life.

Despite some national differences, all this research does share an interest in the (nationally varying) early years of television and relies on oral history interviews as a source of information. Bourdon (2003) uses the related term 'life story' to describe his research, referring to a similar technique which focuses more on the narration of one's life course than on recollections of a specific period or event (Bryman, 2004). While none of these researchers naively take audience memories at face value, they do believe that these interviews provide relevant information, not only about processes of remembering but also about the past. Their use of oral history reflects the wider tendency to consider in-depth interviews not as a way to dig up information but as an active process of meaning-making, where interviewer and narrator collaborate in constructing narratives (Yow, 1994: 1–2). The power balance between interviewer and narrator has shifted, leading to a constructionist view of the interview as an interactional event, reflecting the linguistic turn in the social sciences (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995). While sharing this view on interviews, oral historians focus on the past, so it is worth taking a step back and reflecting on the workings of memory and its relation to historiography.

Memory and/as history

Audience oral histories are in line with the growing interest in and acceptance of popular memory as a valid source of historiography. According to Raphael Samuel (1994), such an approach does not consider history as the prerogative of the professional historian but as a social form of knowledge, 'the work, in any given instance, of a thousand different hands' (p. 8). As defined by the Popular Memory Group (1982: 207), popular memory concerns all the ways in which the past is constructed in society, including private memories as collected through oral history interviews. These are a contested source of information as human memory is fallible and selective and as memories are tainted by later experiences, including the present. However, this is only a problem within an empiricist epistemology, if oral history interviews are considered as a way to straightforwardly recreate a given factual past (Popular Memory Group, 1982: 223–224). When we leave such an empiricist and positivist framework, popular memory – including oral history interviews – does become an invaluable source of information.

In such a constructionist approach, memory is not considered as a mere reflection of the past but as a process of production and representation which is, however, connected to actual events and lived experiences in the past (Radstone, 2000). Indeed, as suggested above, the use of oral history interviews implies a rejection of postmodern conceptions of audience recollections as purely textual and unrelated to lived reality. While discursive, such accounts do contain traces of a lived past as it is meaningfully remembered and reconstructed. Annette Kuhn (2000) calls this 'memory work' conceptualized as the 'active practice or remembering' (p. 186).

It is important to acknowledge the structured nature of such memory constructions. For instance, Peter Burke (1989) discusses the presence of 'schemata' in different sources of social memory, recurring ways of representing the past (p. 102). Schema theory is particularly developed in psychology, as a conceptualization of the knowledge structures based on prior knowledge and past experiences, which guide the selection, storage, abstraction, normalization, integration and retrieval of memories (Cohen, 1996: 76–7). Zerubavel (2003) discusses the 'sociomental topography' of the past, the map-like structure in which history is organized in our minds, arguing that individual memories are manifestations of collective memory, of 'mnemonic communities' sharing certain mental schemata and structures. Considered in this way, memories are narratives and are structured by schemes, tropes and discursive registers (Kuhn, 2002: 9–11).

Such schematic memories may turn into 'myth', conceived here as 'a story with a symbolic meaning, made up of stereotyped incidents and involving characters who are larger than life, whether they are heroes or villains' (Burke, 1989: 103–4). In the same vein, Kuhn (2002) refers to the function of memory stories in reflecting collective imagination:

Thus memory texts may create, rework, repeat and recontextualise the stories people tell each other about the kinds of lives they have led; and these memory-stories can assume a timeless, even a mythic, quality which may be enhanced with every retelling.

As indicated, among others, by Hoskins (2001), in late modernity, such collective memories are increasingly and irredeemably mediated through electronic media.

Based on this theoretical exploration, it is safe to conclude that oral history and popular memory more generally may be useful sources for audience historiography, but they are far from transparent and unproblematic. Even if all historical sources are, to a certain degree, discursive constructions, oral history interviews pose the particular problem that they are retrospective and that it is near impossible to disentangle later experiences and perceptions, structures and schemata from 'original' experiences. While analysis of and reflection on discursive patterns and structures is necessary, it is important also to juxtapose oral history interviews with other sources, as a form of triangulation (Bryman, 2004). While viewed separately, such interviews may be hard to assess, they do become more meaningful when confronted with other historical sources, which they in turn may clarify or even correct.

Memories of early Flemish TV

Drawing on this theoretical and methodological background, I will now discuss my own research on memories of early Flemish television. While the results of this research have

been reported elsewhere (Dhoest, 2006, 2007), in this article I want to reflect more broadly on the workings of memory as evidenced in these oral history interviews and on the methodological and epistemological consequences for oral history research as a source of audience historiography. In essence, the question addressed here is: What can we learn about the past by drawing on interviews in the present?

This research is based on 40 in-depth oral history interviews with viewers over 60 years of age. The interviews were done in 2004, so all narrators were at least 10 years old when television was introduced in Flanders in 1953. They are part of the same generation in media terms, all having consciously lived the introduction of television in their younger years – which will obviously determine their narratives, in view of the often observed generational character of (media) memories (Aroldi and Colombo, 2007). Half of the narrators were male, half were female, but we did not find any clear or systematic differences between the groups. The interviews started in a very open way, asking about early memories of television and television fiction, focusing on the period from the start of television (1953) until the end of the PSB monopoly (1989). Then, broader questions were asked about viewing patterns and preferences in this period: their ‘younger years’, from childhood to early adolescence. Finally, a list of titles of all serial fiction for a general audience (excluding children’s programmes), broadcast before 1989, was discussed (32 titles).¹

Analysing the interviews, many of the mnemonic operations mentioned above can be detected. In what follows, three different but related strands are explored: the connection of memories to the present, memory patterns and schemes, and connections between memory and biography.

First of all, it is clear how memories of early television were informed by the *present*. At the time of the interview, the narrators were ‘older’ viewers and the way they reconstructed the past clearly reflected their current beliefs and knowledge (Ross and Wilson, 2000: 233). People tend to increasingly focus on the past with ageing, drawing more and more upon autobiographical memories as part of a life-review (Schacter, 1996: 297). Therefore, we should remember that such interview material does not provide direct access to the past but, rather, a view on how the past functions now, as part of the current self-definition and also as part of the interview context explicitly asking to reflect on the past. While this may be seen as a drawback, it is actually useful in showing which recollections of the past are strong and important enough to inform current self-definitions and self-presentations. As our interviews show, early television and particular programmes did indeed constitute meaningful and memorable events in the lives of our narrators.

A related observation concerns the fact that older viewers tend to watch and judge TV using the values they grew up with. This leads to certain likes and dislikes, in particular sex, violence and rough language (Riggs, 1998: 28–34; Tulloch, 1992: 181), which often leads them to condemn the current programme offer (Hackl, 2001: 210; Healey and Ross, 2002: 108).² Indeed, most narrators thought programmes of the past were better than the current offer. For instance, Roger, a 63-year-old man, said, ‘In the past the quality of television was much higher than now. Now they show things we should really not be shown’. The offer of television fiction of the past was generally remembered in a very positive way: it was good, the level was high, it was entertaining, the actors were good,

it was 'as life was back then' (Josée, 68 years). Current TV programmes that did not correspond to the values they were brought up with were often strongly criticized. 'I think it was better in the past ... Now it's murder and sex and brutalities, that's the way it is, and violence' (Josée, 68 years).³

Clearly, these recollections about the past are strongly informed by and sometimes explicitly contrasted with the present. These memories are 'useful' to the present, as also found by Spigel: 'Popular memory is bound up with its use-value in the present. It provides people with a way of making sense of an alienating and imperfect world' (Spigel, 1995: 30). Such spontaneous comparisons with contemporary television, while seemingly irrelevant for the purpose of historical audience research, actually help to clarify the values and TV standards our narrators grew up with and to better understand their experience of programmes which, viewed from a contemporary perspective, may seem overly good-natured and unexciting. Methodologically, then, it is useful to not only be aware of the importance of the present in memory work but to actually include it in analysis, as indicative of current and past values and evaluations: what narrators say about the present explicitly or implicitly reflects on the past as they remember it.

Another characteristic of these memories is the strong sense of *nostalgia*. Unsurprisingly, older audiences are often nostalgic, not only for earlier television but also for the world and their life as it was in the past (Gauntlett and Hill, 1999: 195–200). In our research, the act of reminiscing about former television brought out strongly nostalgic memories, the sense that television was better before, not unlike the cinema memories reported by Kuhn (2002). Again, nostalgia may be looked upon as a distortion which makes it harder to assess the original experience, but at the same time, it does tell us a lot about the importance and impact of television at the time. Methodologically, nostalgia is a challenge as it does strongly taint and filter memories, but it is telling *which* events and experiences are nostalgically evoked. These mnemonic patterns are discussed below.

Memory patterns and schemes

As discussed above, memory work is not only informed by the present, it is also selective and constructive. We do not remember everything and we use narrative structures and schemes to make sense of what we remember. In our interviews, the *selective* character of memories became very clear in the first questions, which asked for spontaneous memories about TV fiction of the past. Of the 32 potential titles, only two clearly stuck out: *Schipper naast Mathilde*, a popular comedy series which started in 1955, mentioned by 33, and *Wij, Heren van Zichem*, a folkloric serial first broadcast in 1969, mentioned by 21.⁴ Most memories of this period were related to these two programmes, but even these memories were quite vague and general. Asked to recount what they remember of these productions, most narrators could only sketch the broad setting and some memorable characters and actors. Clearly, if our aim would have been to reconstruct the former TV drama offer, oral history would have been an inadequate method. However, these interviews do help us to understand which programmes have left a mark and how they have become part of television heritage. Moreover, the importance of both programmes is corroborated by contemporary evidence on their popularity across all age groups (Grossey, 1993).

However vague, memories of these programmes acted as a reference point and memory *scheme* for TV fiction of the whole period. Many narrators explicitly compared other serials to *Wij, Heren van Zichem*, or confused their storylines and characters. Actors, too, were strongly associated with the roles they played in one of these two key serials, and they were often (sometimes incorrectly) remembered to have played similar parts in other serials. Thus, actors were also remembered within a scheme, in this case, within a particular role and characterization, a 'type' which retrospectively encapsulates both other parts they played and similar parts played by other actors.

In this way, the programmes were *mythologized*, operating as symbolic stories with prototypical characters. While memory for the details of these and other programmes was limited, we did witness a relatively homogeneous, strong and shared memory for a kind of fiction (quite folkloric, focusing on peasant in life in the past) with particular characters (common, colourful, Flemish people). Again, this account is of limited value to reconstruct the detail of individual productions, but it is invaluable in showing how a particular kind of drama became part of collective memory. Moreover, the accuracy of this overall, synthesized recollection of the period is corroborated by in-depth analysis of the serials, which indeed were predominantly rural and folkloric (Dhoest, 2003).

It is striking that the strongest memories – however schematic – were related to productions from the earlier years of broadcasting, the 1950s and 1960s. Several related factors help to explain this pattern. First, television at this time was relatively new, and memories of these drama productions are strongly linked to first memories of the medium. As found in oral history research elsewhere, for these Flemish viewers the introduction of television was an event. Many vividly remembered the sensation of first seeing television, for instance Odiel (70 years): 'That was a wonderful sensation. It was like magic, you were sitting in front of that glass and you could see what you wanted'. The first series broadcast on Flemish television, *Schipper naast Mathilde*, was particularly closely associated to these early years of broadcasting. Even if many people did not have a TV set at the time, everybody knew the programme: 'That's something everybody knew. Even if you didn't watch it, you did know it' (An, 60 years). It was a social event: 'You can't compare that to the present. I don't know how long ago that is, but there was nobody on the streets. And people only went out after *Schipper naast Mathilde* was finished' (Maria, 87 years).

Moreover, television viewing was often a collective experience at this time, which again evokes pleasurable memories of watching in shop windows or in the house of neighbours or relatives. For Instance, Xavier (70 years) recounts: '*Schipper naast Mathilde* was the first [we saw]. At the time it was broadcast, few people had television sets. So we went to the neighbours and there all the people gathered to watch television'. Echoing the memories about early cinema-going collected by Annette Kuhn and others, these television memories are strongly linked to places and rituals. Again talking about *Schipper naast Mathilde*, Marc (60 years) says,

We also went (to watch) at Aunt Josephine's, but that was exceptional because she was very strict, everything had to remain very clean. We even had to bring our slippers and wear proper clothes. Television was a shrine back then, positioned in the best room. We all had to sit in a

row and we could only watch certain programmes. After the programme was over, you were expected to go home.

So, if memories of the programmes themselves are limited, memories of watching them are particularly vivid and detailed, which illustrates the usefulness of oral history interviews in reconstructing viewing experiences rather than memories of concrete programmes.

Memory and biography

A final structuring principle in television memories concerns the multiple connections to the narrators' own lives and experiences. Most generally speaking, memories of television were often connected to *life events* or *life stages*. Particularly when reminiscing about such a remote past, the narrators did not remember years and dates as much as events and routines. Thus, the purchase of television was often connected to life events (like getting married), while watching certain programmes was often linked to a particular life stage (for instance, watching with one's family as a school kid). School, work, the family situation and so on are important factors explaining the particular connection of the narrators to television. Bourdon (1995, 2003) calls these 'wallpaper memories', memories of television as a background to everyday routines. As in his research, in this project, these were often memories of television in general and less connected to particular programmes.

However, particular productions are also connected to life stages. For instance, talking about her stronger memories of the earlier years, An (60 years) says, 'This really has to do with my life course. That's the period I was still studying; *Schipper naast Mathilde* was broadcast then'. This also helps to explain the prominent position of older programmes in audience memories for, although one could expect programmes of the recent past to be best remembered, it is often observed that memories of one's younger years tend to be stronger. Indeed, research on memory reports a *reminiscence 'bump'* or *'peak'* in life reviews: memories gradually decline over time, but memories of late adolescence and early adulthood tend to be stronger than those of the periods before and after (De Wever and François, 2003: 11; Misztal, 2003: 87; Schacter, 1996: 298; Yow, 1994: 20). Given the age of our narrators, this is when they saw the key programmes they remember so well. Again, this 'bump' could be considered as a distortion if the aim is to simply chart viewing patterns in the past; when the aim is to reconstruct the meaningfulness of programmes, it is clear that, for this generation, these programmes were the most significant. Moreover, their memories of this period in their lives were actually more vivid and detailed than those of other periods. Methodologically, then, in oral history research on media it may be useful to focus in particular on 'early', adolescent and early adulthood memories of different generations.

On a second level, the link of programmes to the narrators' own lives becomes apparent in the way they drew *parallels with 'real life'*, both their own lives and the world they live(d) in. The showing of 'common people' and 'life as it is' was often positively commented upon. Showing 'recognizable', 'familiar', seemingly realistic

pictures of everyday life in the Flemish past is what most of the narrators remembered these early Flemish productions for. For instance, talking about *Schipper naast Mathilde*, Thérèse (74 years) said, 'Everybody liked it, because it was so real, and so recognizable [...] It was, in my eyes, everyday life, the dealings of every day'. This connects to the broader importance of recognition and familiarity as discussed in the literature on cultural proximity (e.g. Straubhaar, 2007). These feelings of connectedness also arose when narrators recognized people or situations from their own life. For instance, Godelieve (68 years) remembered her own youth when viewing *Wij, Heren van Zichem*:

The village atmosphere, and particularly scenes set in a bar, these were mostly good. It may sound strange, but then you feel at home again. My parents had a village bar. [...] So when a convivial scene is set by the bar, that was recognizable to us.

On a third level, *actual connections* of particular programmes to the narrator's own life were conducive to stronger and more positive memories. Most narrators had good recollections of productions that were 'near' them in different ways. One interviewee had actually played in a music band performing in a serial, of which he had fond memories. Possible only in a small region like Flanders, several others knew people involved in a production (as a writer, actor, ...), which raised their interest at the time and which also evoked strong and positive memories during the interview. These are examples of what Bourdon (2003) calls 'close encounter' memories, where television and real life actually meet. However, such connections can also be less direct. For instance, several narrators lived in the area where a production was set and/or shot, and felt connected and proud because of that. Marc (60 years) grew up in the area where *Wij, Heren van Zichem* was shot and says: 'So you felt involved. First of all because you live nearby, you feel a little proud then, like the local people who were extras'.

Taken as a whole, these multiple connections with the lives of the narrators may again complicate the straightforward connection of TV memories with 'actual' viewing, because certain aspects and programmes are prioritized for reasons outside the programme. At the same time, this uneven entrance of programmes and experiences into memory is indicative of the ways in which television actually operates: in close connection to and meaningful interaction with the viewers' everyday lives.

Conclusion

As mentioned in the Introduction, it is crucial that audiences be included in media history, to understand better the uses and meanings of media products. At the same time, this may be the hardest history to write, as audience experiences are more volatile than media products or policies. There are many traces of audience activity and appreciation but most of them are indirect and are based on others' appreciations and discourses (broadcasters, journalists, audience researchers, etc.). First-hand audience accounts are a crucial addition to these sources, but as they were hardly recollected in the early years of broadcasting, only oral history interviews may allow us to hear echoes of these voices, however, distorted.

Reviewing the evidence and connecting it to the theoretical and methodological framework presented in the literature review, it is clear that oral history interviews present many challenges as a source of audience historiography. The present is the frame of reference and starting point for memory work, which generally leads to rather positive, nostalgic memories. Memories, as collected in oral history interviews, are selective and limited: not all programmes are remembered, and only some aspects of these programmes are remembered. At times, these memories are even false, as some things are confused or remembered incorrectly. They are also clearly constructed, using schemes, looking for patterns and creating homogenized 'mythological' narratives and prototypical characters, also drawing on later experiences. Memories of television are uneven, as they are related to life events and life stages, to the social and cultural environment of the narrators as well as their multiple connections with programmes. Finally, like all interview-based research, memories as collected in oral history projects are elicited in and structured by the research context, with a particular researcher asking specific questions. In short, audience memories, as collected through oral history interviews, are radically (inter)subjective.

But then again, so are the experiences of television, which we aim to reconstruct. These interviews may not tell us the objective 'facts' about television viewing in the past, but they tell us a lot about how it was experienced, and how these experiences are still significant to the narrators. From a positivistic point of view, their value may be limited but within a constructivist and interpretive framework they are invaluable: how the past is remembered and narrated is very much how it is still significant. Besides this contemporary significance, these interviews also contain traces of former experiences: what narrators remember and what they forgot. The strength and fondness of these memories and their vividness and multiple connections to the narrators' biography actually tell us a lot about the position and meaning of television in the lives of this first 'television' generation. These memories may be narratively structured, revised and even embellished, but they are no fictions for they are strongly related to actual experiences.

To conclude, some further methodological observations are in place. First, it is important to remain aware of the strongly generational nature of memories. Oral history interviews are particularly useful for establishing connections between media use, biography and society, but it is hard to disentangle generational (cohort) experiences from life-stage and age-related experiences. Therefore, for future research, it is desirable to include and compare different generations. Second, as mentioned throughout the text, oral history interviews are limited as a tool to reconstruct actual facts. For this reason, if possible it is advisable to check oral history findings against other available historical sources in order to frame and if possible corroborate them. Particularly when complemented with other sources of information such as policy documents, ratings and press reports, oral history interviews can help us understand media experiences in such a near past, which already feels like a strange and distant country.

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Notes

1. I would like to express my gratitude to the participants of the 2003–2004 Media Culture Seminar at the K.U. Leuven for their help with the interviews.
2. This discontentment also relates to the fact that contemporary television does not sufficiently cater for older viewers, but it would lead too far to also discuss the current programme offer, which was not explicitly addressed in the interviews.
3. All quotes from interviews are literal translations by the author.
4. In line with academic literature, here I use the term ‘serial’ for a production with a continuing storyline and ‘series’ for a production with a separate story per episode, but in the rest of the text I use the term ‘serial’ or ‘serial fiction’ as most productions were serials (see Creeber, 2004).

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