As TV viewers we are usually innocent of our inevitable part in the struggle for meaning. As we put our feet up in front of the TV, our mood is more likely to be relaxed than combative ... yet ... our regular encounters with the kaleidoscope of words and images that flow into our living rooms form an inexorable part of our semiotic universe ...

(Justin Lewis, 1991, p. 42)

A TV series typically presents itself as a form of drama which offers a unique bond with its audience. TV itself is an intimate, ‘domestic’ medium which the viewer experiences as part of the routine of everyday life, and the aim of the makers of a TV series is to win the ‘loyalty’ of viewers so that they will be persuaded to integrate its characters and situations into that routine. The experience of watching thus becomes ‘ritualised’ as part of a pattern of lifestyle. In the case of an action-adventure-based series such as Star Trek viewers must, in a weekly ‘ritual’ of suspension of disbelief, accept narrative conventions such as stylised fight scenes or last-minute dramatic escapes from danger. The regular viewer of a TV series, who becomes ‘privileged’ with more and more understanding of a show’s characters and situations, naturally learns to ‘read’ the ‘text’ of a TV series in a way that may elude more ‘highbrow’ critics. As Jane Feuer points out:

observers from the high culture who visit TV melodrama occasionally in order to issue their tedious reports about our cultural malaise are simply not seeing what the TV audience sees ... They are especially blind to the complex allusiveness with which the TV medium uses its actors ... (in Newcomb, 1994, p. 44).
The earliest studies of TV postulated it as a 'hypnotic' and rather dangerous medium in which individual segments were subsumed in what Raymond Williams (1966, p. 3) described as an endless 'flow' of programming. Viewers were portrayed as being highly susceptible to 'conditioning' by the manipulation of this 'flow'. These studies originated out of concerns about the supposedly 'damaging' effects of the medium, and they were mainly concerned with measuring the extent to which TV influenced behaviour, particularly among children. Much debate concentrated on what became known as the 'hypodermic' model of TV effects, whereby the showing of violent or antisocial behaviour was taken to indicate an 'injection' of such behaviour into society. But as TV grew and diversified as a medium researchers began to take a more sympathetic stance. In 1974, Blumer and Katz produced the theory of 'Uses and Gratifications', which concentrated on the notion of the TV viewer as an active rather than a passive participant who could 'see through' a programme's narrative conventions and thus: 'make sense of programmes in a way that is relatively unconstrained by the structure of the text, drawing instead upon his or her interests, knowledge and expertise' (quoted in Livingstone, 1990, p. 36).

Later developments in audience theory in the cultural studies school shifted to the notion of the viewer as an active producer of meaning. As Barwise and Ehrenberg (1988, p. 25) point out: 'the audience is not an indiscriminating crowd all watching the most popular fare. The average viewer watches only 2 or 3 of the top ten rated programmes in the week ...' This new emphasis on the TV audience as being selective in its viewing habits and creative in its interpretations has led to the activities of fans being taken far more seriously. Many recent studies have gravitated towards examinations of fan culture, of which Star Trek fandom soon presented itself as a key example. As we have seen, the Star Trek audience has played a key role in pressurising the TV companies to keep the various series and films going, and the Trek fan community has always displayed an unprecedented degree of internal organisation. Tulloch and Jenkins describe the growth of the Star Trek convention circuit, which they identify as a model for 'cult' organisation for other TV series. They also imply that the narrative mode of the series has encouraged an active fan response: 'the generic multiplicity and ideological contradictions of Star Trek invite fans to construct their own utopias from the materials it provides ...' (1995, p. 212).

Two fairly recent examinations of the TV audience – Jenkins' Textual