

Major national film audience research project launched

A major new £900,000 research project is to transform our understanding of how people watch film today



Left to right, back row: Peter Merrington, Dave Forrest, Catharine Des Forges, Ian Wild, Mike Pidd. Front row: Bridgette Wessels, Liz Robson, Anna Kime, Sarah-Jane Meredith, Andrew Higson. Photograph: Mark Harvey

Beyond the Multiplex: Audiences for Specialised Film in English Regions will focus on ways to enable a wider range of audiences to participate in a more diverse film culture that embraces the wealth of films beyond the mainstream.

The ambitious three year project follows an award from the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and will be led by Newcastle University in partnership with the Universities of Liverpool, Sheffield, York and Film Hub North (part of the BFI Film Audience Network (FAN) supported by National Lottery funding).

Audiences at the centre

Working at a scale and depth not undertaken before in film audience research, the project addresses how people watch film and engage with film culture from rural film clubs to the international film festivals, to those watching Video on Demand (VoD) at home.

Collaborating with those working in film and engaging a broad range of film audiences, the project will provide new evidence, online analytical data tools, and a digital methodology for audience research.

Independent and collaborative research

The research will involve a comparative study of film audiences in four English regions: the North East, Yorkshire and the Humber, the North West and the South West. For each region the project will collect data through interviews, focus groups and a longitudinal survey. The research will assess regional venues, events and programming and look at the interpretation of film as well as film policy and industry developments and regional demographics. To bring all of this together, the project will use digital humanities methods to structure, store and analyse the data.

Through a partnership led by Film Hub North and the wider BFI Film Audience Network, the project will feed into the BFI's audiences strategy, which aims to grow audiences from underrepresented groups, widen film choice and enhance the cultural benefits of British and international film.

A regional approach

While availability of mainstream film is good across England, provision of British and international film is low across the English regions outside London, which limits the opportunities for people to experience a diverse film culture.

Beyond the Multiplex is developed from a pilot research [project](#) that found significant disparities in the provision of a diverse film culture in the North East and Yorkshire. The research team will conduct extensive field research in the four regions exploring film practices and experiences regarding taste, venues, film events, digital platforms, and the meanings audiences take away from specialised film.

For more information visit the project [website](#), a selection of images from the launch event at Showroom Cinema in Sheffield is available to download [here](#).

Bridgette Wessels, Professor of Sociology, Newcastle University said, "We are extremely pleased to be working with our Film Hub partners on the project and engaging with the wider BFI FAN and others working in audience development. The project is addressing the challenge of understanding film audiences in-depth and at scale in regional contexts for the first time. We are aiming to develop an innovative methodology to do this that can then be openly shared with FAN and others working in audience development."

Ben Luxford, Head of UK Audiences, BFI said, "Growing audiences is central to our five year strategy BFI2022, and the Film Audience Network continues to support exciting and diverse programming, proactive outreach and audience facing projects to engage new audiences. Alongside that, research such as this is essential to help us understand contemporary viewing habits and we relish the opportunity to have a greater understanding of audiences in the English regions."

Anna Kime, Manager, Film Hub North said, "Dedicated research with such an impressive team allows us to really deepen our audience development work. We're delighted to have the opportunity to continue this partnership."

For further information please contact:

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<https://www.beyondthemultiplex.net>

Project Partners

- BFI Film Hub North (Led by Showroom Cinema, Sheffield)
- Film Hub North West Central (Led by HOME, Manchester)
- Film Hub South West & West Midlands (Led by Watershed, Bristol)
- Film Audience Network (BFI)
- The Audience Agency

Project team

The project is managed by a highly experienced interdisciplinary team comprised of academic experts in film studies, sociology, cultural policy, digital humanities and partners from film policy and the film industry.

- Bridgette Wessels, Professor of Sociology, School of Geography, Politics and Sociology, Newcastle University
- Andrew Higson, Greg Dyke Professor of Film and Television, University of York
- Michael Pidd, Director, The Digital Humanities Institute, University of Sheffield
- Simeon Yates, Associate Head of School (Research and Impact) and Director of the Centre for Digital Humanities and Social Science, University of Liverpool
- David Forrest, Senior Lecturer in Film Studies, School of English, University of Sheffield
- Peter Merrington, Research Associate, School of Geography, Politics and Sociology, Newcastle University
- Liz Robson, Research Assistant, School of Geography, Politics and Sociology, Newcastle University
- Huw D. Jones, Lecturer in Film Studies, University of Southampton

BFI Film Audience Network

The BFI Film Audience Network (FAN) is a ground-breaking initiative that gives audiences across the UK the opportunity to see a broader range of films in a cinema setting. For filmmakers, getting films onto cinema screens is a highly competitive business, particularly for specialised films which includes archive, documentary, independent and foreign language films.

Supported by National Lottery funding the BFI FAN works with cinema exhibitors, film festivals, educators, film societies, community venues, film archives and other organisations in their regions or nations to boost audiences for film across the UK.

