

## 5 Audience-led analysis

### Or: on how to be invited 'in'

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Helen Wood cautions that analyzing television as 'text' "flattens the spatial and temporal experience of television as it takes place, *happens*, in the life of the living room" (2009, 4). Expanding on the introduction of ethnography-in-action in the previous chapter, we are approaching media practices as something intimate, something private here – and audience research as something that is all about being 'invited in'. Thinking about how media are always embedded in the everyday opens up to insights that go beyond the medium as 'text'. In other words, we are asking ourselves:

**What can inviting audiences to talk about  
everyday media practices tell us about  
community, identity and intimacy?**

Understanding how audiences consume, interact with and reflect on media objects leads us from open questions to more focused ones that help theorize findings. It means putting "human experience at the center of our inquiry" (2003, 174), as media and cultural studies scholar Jane Stokes proposed. Instead of emphasizing questions of

objectivity versus subjectivity, using audience-led analysis means foregrounding reflexivity. In practice, this means reflecting on your own preconceptions and intuitive and instinctive reactions. You do so in order to remain open to hearing what others have to say. As a starting point for audience-led analysis, this chapter introduces you to Media Mapping, Media Diaries and Qualitative Interviews – three different approaches that work well alone but also in tandem.

## Television and the everyday: talk me through your day

'Television studies' as a discipline pays attention to not just what's on television, but to the context of media consumption. Media, whether television or social media, are woven into the fabric of everyday life. As media change, our surroundings change and will 'feel' differently. Sonia Livingstone (2007) has argued that the 'portability' of media, for example, changed life in the family home. Whereas the traditional television set constructed a communal space that family life centered around, smartphones, tablets, laptops and other 'personal media' devices are dispersed throughout the home and create a more and more individual media consumption. Anna McCarthy (2001) followed television outside of the home: in waiting rooms in hospitals, in the lobbies of airports and train stations, in laundromats, in bars and in the windows of different stores as some sort of 'ambient television'. In both of these seminal books, the presence of television or screens really is connected to questions of community and belonging.

As audience researchers, we are interested in these questions as well – and always hope to be 'invited in'. *When* and *where* you watch something might be as important, if not even more important, as *what* you watch. *What* you watch will depend on what you have access to financially and technologically, it might also depend on what you have in the fridge, how you travel to and from work or school, which device is currently charged, or when you have to get up in the morning. Being able to engage with audiences in their everyday allows us to explore

these spatial, temporal, social, financial and technical dimensions of media practices.

Importantly, this means that we do not assume that audiences 'just' do what companies, corporations or larger commercial systems want them to do. In their exploration of 'roaming' audiences, Annette Hill and Jian Chung Lee (2022) were interested in how viewers in Malaysia and Indonesia move across streaming services – from Netflix to Youtube to public broadcasting channels and back to Netflix. To make visible how audiences navigate these different platforms, channels and services, they asked their participants to – literally – draw a map of their viewing practices. Interestingly, the participants in Hill and Lee's study drew on familiar types of maps and landscapes to think about what places and spaces different players and platforms occupied. *Disney* was described as a tall tower, *Netflix* as a commercial Business Park where not everything is accessible to everyone. Thinking about media in relation to their environment – be it real or fictional – can help audience researchers make sense of how viewers engage with different media throughout their day.

### Practice exercise: mapping media

For this exercise, think about how you 'move' through, within and across different media platforms in the span of an average day: where are different media positioned on this map? What are the connections between different platforms and services? And what do different platforms look like?

Reflecting on the position, size and accessibility of different platforms, services and channels can tell you something about the different roles platforms play in your day. You might think differently about Netflix than you do about Public Broadcasting or torrent sites. You may feel that the world of media is changing and is offering less and less access to 'free' content. Or you might feel that the ways others operate on social media is spoiling the fun for the majority of okay users

which is starting to make you hesitate to post comments, reactions or reflections yourself.

## **From one platform to another (and back again): the media diary**

What do you watch on an average day? Are you consuming different media on a Tuesday then on a Sunday? Where and when do you use your smartphone the most? Asked out of the blue, these questions might actually not be that easy to answer. Exploring *when*, *where* and *how* audiences use different platforms – and different media on these platforms – has the potential to tell us a lot about how audiences come to terms with new forms, formats and rules on social media and professional content platforms in the cross-media landscape. As we are not scientists observing viewers in a laboratory, these everyday practices and sentiments can be difficult to track. Easiest to get your participants to track them for you. Enter: The 'Media Diary'. In their large study on changing news consumption, Nick Couldry, Sonia Livingstone and Tim Markham noticed that self-produced diaries "generated evidence about the context (social or otherwise) of everyday action that would not otherwise be available" (2007, 45). The 'Media Diary' tracks media practices as well as reflections about them – without the researcher having to be 'there'.

There is no predefined timeframe for making sense of viewing practices. There is no need for a particular moment to start or end your diary-keeping. Noting what you watch, where you watch it and what you notice about your own viewing practices over a longer period of time can reveal both patterns and changes. It can help you as a researcher and it potentially provides valuable material to the research community. Think, for example, how living with somebody else besides your family – like a partner or a roommate – has influenced your viewing habits. Do you 'wait' for each other to watch the newest

episode of a series? Has owning a second device, like a smartphone or tablet, changed how you watch something on your laptop or on a big screen? What do you pay attention to, and how do the visuals and the sound become decoupled from another?

Keeping a detailed viewing diary requires quite an effort. When you are asking others to keep track of their viewing, it can be a challenge to motivate your participants to keep going. We, therefore, recommend finding a 'happy' format: a media diary needs to be easy to fill out, carry with you, and be easy to remember. You can find a template that we use regularly in this chapter: rather than ask for long reflections, we prefer using a table-format that works well with quick note taking while watching or remembering something. For some, a simple notebook works best (Figure 5.1).

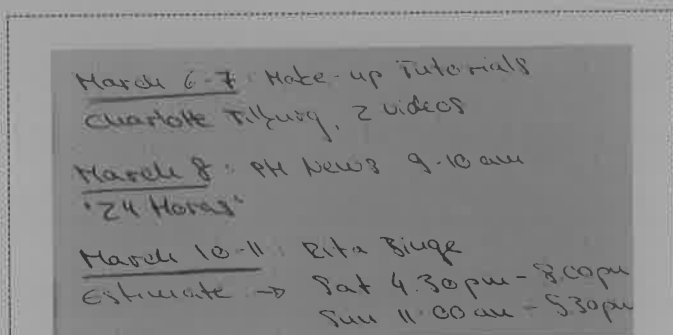


Figure 5.1

Anonymized fragment shared with permission from a media diary used in preparation for an interview about the current media landscape. By paying attention to your own 'micro' decisions, you start to see how much media content is used almost sub-consciously and disappears from your thoughts easily. This does not mean that it is inconsequential. The make-up tutorial may have strengthened self-confidence for important life decisions, the binge may have allowed



The 'media diary' works well combined with other qualitative methods, particularly with interviews. Talking about *what*, *why*, and *where* your respondents watched something does not only give you something to (start to) talk about in an interview but also reveals the preconceived notions of researchers and participants. Nick Couldry, Sonia Livingstone and Tim Markham call this "the subtle, sometimes conflicted ways in which information is processed, ideas mulled over and responses contemplated" (2007, 45).

### Practice exercise: the media diary

For this exercise, try to 'record' your viewing practices in as much detail as possible – and ask yourself afterward what you might have missed. This becomes especially interesting when you compare your viewing diary to someone else's. Did you watch the same things, in the same environments, or at the same time?

### From 'my' day to 'your' day: qualitative interviews

To make sense of viewing practices, self-recording tools like maps and media diaries will not tell you everything you want (or need) to know. Media diaries made during the Covid-19 pandemic showed how viewing practices had profoundly changed. The evening news on broadcast television became an important source for information about new rules and regulations. As did livestreamed press conferences that most of us – under ordinary circumstances – would not have watched. Television had again become a medium of 'liveness', somewhat surprising in an increasingly fractured and on-demand media landscape. To further explore the corresponding question "How did the *meaning* of television viewing change during the pandemic?" you would need the people who filled them out.

For interviews, there are a few logistical questions to consider: first and foremost *where* to find participants, *what* to ask them and *how* to conduct your interview.

### 1. *The Where: Finding Your Participants*

Once you know that you want to do interviews, you likely want to get started right away. But who to interview? Depending on your subject, you could start in your immediate surroundings. Your family members, your roommates, your friends and your fellow students make great participants for your first interviews. They already know and trust you. You can also easily remind them of the scheduled interviews! These first interviewees might then be able to recommend somebody else for you to talk to. This is called 'snowballing'. Their family members, their roommates, their friends and their fellow students are called 'seeds'. When used well, the danger of remaining in your own 'bubble' is manageable. It is a matter of instructing the 'seed' persons well. Interestingly, methodologists have found that snowballing runs the risk of overselecting women. They are assumed to be more cooperative and less able to resist a researcher's request' (Noy 2008). As women, we are not so sure this will be the case. As feminists, we caution you to be aware of such social power mechanisms, which will also be related to, e.g., class, educational level and ethnicity.

Of course, you can also start with an open call for participants. Ien Ang, in her groundbreaking study of *Watching Dallas*, placed an ad in the Dutch women's magazine *Viva* to find respondents. Quite importantly, she positioned herself as a frequent viewer of the American soap herself and asked: "Would anyone like to write and tell me why you like watching it too, or dislike it?" (1985, 10). Today's version of placing a newspaper ad could be a post on your Instagram Story. Based on a very, very short summary

of your research idea, you can ask your friends and followers to share your open call as well in order to find research participants from outside your own circle of family, friends and acquaintances. While you can find plenty of useful advice for online snowball methods, changing privacy regulations make these more difficult to employ: the option of randomly approaching others on social media has more and more closed down. Our advice is to be patient and tenacious. It will require time to find (enough) participants. Be persistent in following up with people who agreed to participate, they tend to cancel interview appointments last-minute. Do not let yourself be discouraged!

## 2. *The What: Structuring Your Interviews*

As we have discussed in [Chapter 4: Ethnography](#), an interview allows you to directly follow up on what your participants say. 'Follow up' to clarify answers, yes. But also to literally 'follow' your participants – in directions and toward topics that you might not have anticipated. That said: you still need to have a structure for your interview. Especially for new audience researchers, going into an interview without a plan rarely goes well. You might run out of questions or lose track of what you were actually interested in. In between a strict order of questions and no order at all, is the 'semi-structured interview'. In practice, this means that you prepare not necessarily questions but conversation topics that you want to touch on in each interview. This allows the conversation to flow freely, and your participants to be involved in the direction the conversation can go in. At the same time, the topic list in front of you (or in the back of your mind) helps you steer the conversation back on course when you want to. As you talk to more participants, you might also want to go back to your topic list and revise it based on previous interviews. This process of gradually focusing the research is a strength of qualitative research. It allows embracing unfolding insight. In quantitative

research, such a procedure is anathema. It hopelessly upsets the possibility of pure comparison. Fortunately, that is not what we are interested in.

### 3. *The How: Being an Interviewer*

When you are asking your participants about everyday practices, it helps to see them as *experts*. Even if you are doing the exact same things in your leisure time, if you have watched the same shows, played the same games or hated the same character, you want to know how *they* (!) do and feel. While shared interests and experiences help to find participants and get them to talk to you in the first place, the interview situation itself places the focus on the participant. In practice, this means that you draw on the expertise of your participants to ask for definitions, for explanations, for contextualization. You do not impose your own. When you read the transcripts of interviews conducted by others, you will see that good interviewers know how to follow-up on what their participants say. They are genuinely curious about how their participants make sense of and find meaning in their everyday practices. Sometimes, you might want to slightly 'push' your respondent's buttons – by offering an alternative understanding of a scene or a news item, for instance, or by asking for an evaluation of a statement. You do not do this to catch them out. Rather, you are trying to get access to the varied ways in which they make sense of the world.

Jonathan Potter and Margaret Wetherell (1988) underline how language is both functional and variable and that this allows us in everyday conversations to not always be consistent. Rather than see this as lying, or misrepresentation, the use of different 'interpretative repertoires' points to the different cultural resources we have for sense and meaning-making. Social beings that we are, we will use whatever resources we ourselves have available to connect with the knowledge of others in a conversation.

As researchers, we like to make friendly use of this mechanism. When we challenge informants with questions like: "Is this fair, though?" or "Would you really do this?", we are carefully inviting respondents to think about their statements and offer further explanation. You want to avoid aggressive or presumptuous questions. This might not need repeating but still: as an interviewer your main task is to be open and respectful. To listen to what others have to say.

### **Research example: 'as recommended by' and the trust in technology**

Netflix, Amazon, Youku, Disney, Ziggo, Tencent, Hulu, iflix – the number of streaming platforms becomes longer and longer. How do you decide what to watch (next)? With new content premiering across platforms constantly, professional television critics can hardly keep up with everything that needs to be reviewed and 'judged' for a comprehensive recommendation – especially as it comes to global shows and series. Cue 'protoprofessionalization', as Jan Teurlings (2018) calls it. Because of the narrow scope of professional reviews, new recommendation and suggestion systems are on the rise: from community-based recommendations like ratings on online forums such as *Rotten Tomatoes* via the integrated algorithmic recommendations à la "Suggested for you" on different streaming platforms to interpersonal recommendations by people viewers know outside of the digital world. For a small-scale project, we were interested in how viewers navigate these different sources of recommendations. Whose recommendations are the most trustworthy? Is there a difference between human and nonhuman, offline and online recommendations? Because these are complex questions directly linked to practices and the reasoning behind these practices, we decided to conduct long interviews.

***The participants: how do you decide who to interview?***

In the selection of interviewees for this example, we considered three markers: age, gender and place of residence. As Oblak and Luther have argued, contemporary audience research should take social markers like the ones mentioned above into account, as they "provide a framework of meaning for [...] media consumption and interpretation" (2017, 419). At the same time, there are many more markers – so why these three? *Age and Gender*: We decided to interview young women of the same age group between 29 and 35 years. Born in the mid to late 1980s, this age group can be considered what Palfrey and Gasser term the first generation of digital natives (2008). Based on age, we assumed that our participants would be familiar with similar platforms and (online) tools and share at least some media practices in their daily lives. *Gender*: especially as it comes to the targeting of advertisements, gender plays an important role. Using gender as our marker here as well allowed us to explore whether our participants noticed similar recommendations given to them in online and offline settings. *Place of Residence*: as the (perceived) size of available content can differ immensely between different platforms and countries, we chose participants based on their access to a specific – and national – platform. All three interviewees have or previously had a place of residence in Germany, and thereby access to Netflix in Germany in addition to possible other platforms. Having one local(ized) platform as a reference point shifted the attention away from platform-specific factors like performance or interface design. As you can see from this brief overview, all decisions – even as it comes to who to interview – need to be thought about carefully and justified.

### ***The questions: how do you decide what to ask?***

The conversation topics for this project were (1) *Recommendations*: where do viewers notice recommendations – and do they follow them?, (2) *Conversations*: with whom and where did viewers discuss what they have (not) watched? and (3) *Technologies*: how do viewers understand the role of different platforms in their decisions and conversations? For each of these topics, we prepared questions and/or points to bring up. After each interview, we updated these lists with

input from the participants – to then, in turn, draw on these in the next interview. As a starting point, we asked each participant what they had watched 'last' – and what made them start this show in the first place. During the interview, we placed different sources of recommendations as opposites. Not only in terms of their trustworthiness but also their effectiveness. Questions like: "Do you trust the recommendations of your friends more than online recommendations?" or "Does the algorithm predict your taste better than your friends?" were meant to access feelings about technology. Each interview ended in a similar way: by asking our participants whether they recommended media to other people – and why (not). Circling back to the question of personal recommendations at the end of the interview allowed the participants to reflect on practices of decision-making as passive 'receiver' and active 'giver' of recommendations. It also allowed them to expand on and add to earlier answers.

### ***The answers: how do you decide what's the most important?***

In the answers, we began to notice that 'trust' played an important role for our participants. It also clearly intersected with how they thought about technology. Moving beyond our research question: "How do you decide what to watch?", the qualitative interviews pointed us to how viewers navigate the technologization of television in a cross-media landscape. On the one hand, respondents embraced the convenience afforded by technological solutions; on the other hand, they all emphasized their distrust in the intentions behind these exact technological affordances. At first, these two repertoires appear to be contradictory. Taken together, they produce a sense of 'comfort' for the respondents that has often been associated with watching television in general. The convenience afforded by technological recommendations provides a comfortable simplification in an already complicated world full of choices. For digital natives like our respondents, it was equally comforting to suggest they understood the 'hidden' workings of technologies like the algorithms used by online video platforms. By acknowledging the manipulation, the respondents felt

they could negate its (potentially harmful) influence. It justified giving in to the convenience of using untrustworthy technology. This is a direction we did not expect when we started out with this case study – but one that we found highly interesting. This is something that might happen in your interviews too: following your participants might lead you to find unexpected answers as well as new insights.

### Exercise: template for your interview form

|                                    |                                                          |
|------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|
| Name interviewer                   |                                                          |
| Name respondent (Pseudonym)        |                                                          |
| Date interview                     |                                                          |
| Location interview                 |                                                          |
| Duration interview (00.00 - 00.00) |                                                          |
| Age respondent                     |                                                          |
| Gender                             |                                                          |
| Sexual orientation                 |                                                          |
| Class background                   |                                                          |
| Residence                          |                                                          |
| Composition of household           |                                                          |
| National identification            |                                                          |
| Political preference               |                                                          |
| Work, study                        |                                                          |
| Way of living/lifestyle            |                                                          |
| Consent Form Signed                | <input type="checkbox"/> YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO |