

2 Useful (key) theoretical terms

Reconceptualizing audience research for deeply mediatized societies

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This chapter introduces you to (some of) the central concepts of cross-media audience research. They are linked to examples to show what kind of storytelling research allows for. Storytelling is a form of theorization – of finding narrative logic based on the combination of concepts, questions and the interpretation of collected data. In other words, audience research allows us to do complex jigsaw puzzles that help understand the narratives that are shared in contemporary deeply mediatized societies, the social rules and mechanisms that are embodied in these narratives and our feelings about them.

The three sets of terms in this chapter focus on (1) the individual, (2) shared culture and (3) methodology. In qualitative audience research, we often work with individuals or small groups of people – but we are interested in culture as a *shared* accomplishment. Culture needs us as individuals to continue to exist but is also something that no individual controls on their own. In fact, in many ways, culture controls us. An example would be norms for how to behave or look. The second set

of terms focuses on the social level at which media operate. It clarifies why qualitative audience research identifies *practices* in relation to structures of meaning-making. Taste is a good example. It would seem to be something a person has. It turns out that taste is not something you have but an acquired set of norms and standards that we rely on in finding our way in life: taste is how we navigate what art to like, how to dress and behave the right way. Taste helps distinguish ourselves from others. Ultimately, taste does not define a person but the groups to which you want (or do not want) to belong. The key author here is Pierre Bourdieu (1984). The third set of terms has to do with how methodology is a craft that comes with specific tools. Some of those have already made their way into Chapter 1 and even in this chapter. When meaning-making is presented as a practice, it means that meaning is never given but comes into being under specific power relations (to do with class, gender, ethnicity, religion and so on) and, therefore, needs deconstruction as a critical practice. Deconstruction in the context of this book is both a philosophical *and* a methodological point of departure.

First level: from the individual to the subject

It is not necessary to adhere to post-structuralist insights to do qualitative audience research. It does make it easier to do it well when you understand the basic tenets of such an approach. When we speak of individuals, there is a suggestion of boundaries. The skin and the body's mucous membranes are where a person ends and the world begins. Inside the body, it is easy to imagine a mind and a will that make that body act and reflect. Thinking in such a way is to understand individuals as autonomous beings. It is clear that autonomy is at the very least, in part, an illusion. Acting in the world requires language (which precedes us, it exists long before we are born) and knowledge of how to behave. Those are per definition shared.

Sociologists, anthropologists, researchers thinking about language suggest that partly we have 'agency', a measure of control, when it comes to language. Partly, we do not. You may be familiar with semiotics as defined by Ferdinand de Saussure in the early twentieth century. He posits that there is a difference between 'langue' (French for language as a formal system) and 'parole' (talk, or language as spoken). Because we use formal systems, they will change. We make mistakes or we try to change things which results in new codes. As times change, new words and meanings are needed. Those that are less and less used slip away.

Roland Barthes on myth

In the 1957 book called *Mythologies* (translated into English in 1972), Roland Barthes explains how the distance between a word as sound, or a set of letters and what it means, offers space for ideology to come into being. If language is simply a set of codes and social conventions, nothing much is the matter. After all, we can situate those codes and conventions historically and understand where they come from. That tells us, for instance, what interests and power relations they are connected with. Words, however, can themselves become mere basic material for what he calls 'second order signification'. When we lose where words come from, they can achieve mythic status. They simply become a given and suggest that what the world is like, is its 'natural' state. This, Barthes calls mythology. Others speak of ideology, a shared worldview that hides power inequality and tells us what our place (and the place of others) is in it. By disavowing their history and appearing as 'natural,' ideologies can help condone insidious forms of social inequality that are, for instance, racist, sexist or transphobic.

Do read the 'Myth Today' essay in Roland [Barthes' book \(1972\)](#). For examples of how audience research can benefit from Barthes work, read Annette Hill's book [Media Experiences \(2019\)](#).

When we think of the autonomous individual in this light, she is, in many ways, defined by the language that is at her disposal. She speaks – but not with means she developed on her own or for herself. Instead of thinking about persons as individuals, it is useful to think about them as ‘subjects’. The French philosopher, historian and activist Michel Foucault (1926–1984) offers ‘subjectivity’ as consisting of two parts: the one half is about how we are ‘subjected’ to systems such as language (but also state control), and the other half is that we feel we are ‘subjects’ in the sense that the world turns around us. The subject in grammar is the central element of a sentence. Individuality is the product of such a perspective. Foucault takes this further and shows how we are not only disciplined to become individuals but that we take pleasure in being part of our own subjectification. A concept you may come across in relation to this is ‘governmentality’.

Governmentality addresses precisely how ‘power’ works as a peculiar kind of pressure to fall in line. It is how states (from the bureaucracy to the police and the military) govern populations by aiming to influence individual behavior. Governments in the Global North do not so much discipline people (although they do have that option through the state power of the police, the military and the legal system) but rely in large part on their willing participation. The media are important here, and they offer examples (of what is and is not okay, what we should aspire to) and incentives. Deconstruction of practices of meaning-making needs to always also address how these examples are entangled with disciplinary power and with the neoliberal ideology they back up. While neoliberalism with its focus on individuals and individuality pleasantly suggests autonomy and that we are the architects of our own success, it is a horrible frame for those who are not wealthy or find themselves on the wrong side of any number of good-bad dichotomies that underlay definitions of gender, race and ethnicity, sexuality or ability. Not having success, being poor, not fitting in, being discriminated against, bullied, excluded are defined as

personal faults. It is how the social power dynamics that are instigated by states (to classify individuals by income, profession, living arrangement, race) are masked and perpetuated. In all cases, attending to how social power relations are acknowledged or disavowed will afford better insight in everyday processes of meaning-making. We are not 'controlled' by the media but by states that identify, classify, order and control us.

A good example in audience research is when interviewees speak of 'guilty pleasures'. That sounds as much of a paradox as the Foucault-based explanation of subjectivity above. Usually, guilty pleasure refers to enjoying television programs or movies that are deemed to be in 'bad taste'. They are overly melodramatic or not well-made. The term does not seem to apply to social media use. In that case informants say: I am addicted. Addiction is the superlative of guilty pleasure. It is taking pleasure beyond the boundaries of what is healthy. Neither is 'true'. Most of the guilty pleasure 'bad taste' examples are innocent and reflect the other person's upbringing or what they think the interviewer will or will not like to hear. Addiction also is hardly meant in a clinical sense. There is no deep wish to detox. Rather, it appears to intensify the pleasure of gaming or checking in on social media to suggest that it is a bit dangerous. These two examples suggest that as 'subjects' we enjoy the distance between being subjected to rules and norms while we also feel their weight and their supposed rationality. In referring to them and abiding by them, we strengthen the very norms and rules that we also seek to be free from.

Psychology and the individual

Psychologists have a very different way of looking at individuals and personhood. As a discipline, psychology is deeply invested in therapy and helping individuals feel better, work through their mental health problems and stay away from what harms them. In media research,

psychologists have worked with experiments to test how for instance mediated violence is harmful to children. Harmful here means that they become anxious or violent and display behavior that bothers or hurts others. The results they found after showing children cartoons point, indeed, to the fact that media exposure had effects but also that these can only be seen in the short term and cannot be measured for the longer term. Such effects apparently dissipate quickly and are more a form of excitement.

Another kind of research that psychologists do is survey research. This is quantitative research that relies on a set of techniques based on aselect data collection and statistical data analysis. These allow a researcher to say something about larger groups of individuals. Patti Valkenburg found that most teenagers are not greatly influenced in a negative way by their social media use and enjoy benefits. A small group, however, feels bad about themselves after extended social media use. She is careful to emphasize that we should not demonize social media but do need to be aware of the risk they pose for a vulnerable group (see [Valkenburg, Meyer and Beyens 2022](#)).

Qualitative audience researchers are not averse to understanding vulnerability but they know they do not have the tools to say something about individual persons (we are not therapists or psychoanalysts) nor about 'populations' (large groups of individuals). We feel it is more useful to unravel the different layers of meaning-making that are involved in for instance gaming. We might focus on affordances, feelings, the assumption of filter bubbles or the friendships gamers talk about. We look at their world through their eyes rather than at them and, thus, develop a different kind of knowledge of how media matter.

Another term that is used in qualitative audience research at the level of the individual is identity. This too is an important one as it speaks to our sense of self in relation to others. Identity is not personality or a person's core self says Kathryn Woodward (2004, 13). Rather, identity is the interface between (a) a social role, (b) the way a person performs that role, (c) the emotions and feelings they have and

(d) how others perceive them being that particular person. Identity always depends on difference (what you are not) and on community (being the same as some and different from others). Identity has to do with performance as the sociologist Erving Goffman defined it (1990). Woodward adds that if identity is the 'interface between the personal and the social, we need to take the social, cultural and economic factors into account which shape experience. How are we able to take up some identities and not others' (Woodward 2004, 18)? The extent to which we have agency or are at the mercy of others can differ significantly. Identity, therefore, requires understanding of how power, ideology and the myths people believe in are relevant.

Second level: media practices and/as meaning-making

Via identity, we can connect (everyday) meaning-making, which is what audience research wants to know about, with understanding how societies function. Stuart Hall called that link 'the cultural circuit'. He said that meaning is what gives us a sense of our own identity, of who we are and with whom we 'belong'. The circuit moves from meaning-making to culture and how it helps us mark out and maintain identity within groups and the differences between them (1997, 3). Meaning-making and identity formation are deeply connected. Culture is the space where they meet.

Stepping away from the level of individuality, personhood and subjectivity, we come to the crossroads where media matter. This is the intersection between culture, identity and belonging. Put differently: human beings rely on storytelling to understand the world. Storytelling is what the media provide us with. We need to know what dangers to avoid, we like to feel safe and warm and happy and from time to time we like excitement and sensation. In oral culture storytelling connected smaller groups of people. From hieroglyphs and other early scripts, we see how important it was felt to be to make sure that stories

survive. Print media, cinema, radio and television take us in seven-mile boots to today's social media and cross-media culture which perform those very same functions.

Media do more than inform us about the world. They are also a kind of mirror that tells us about norms and codes and ideals. Both processes are referred to as 'representation'. As it is impossible to re-create the entire world, the media choose and select what to focus on and how. Simply making what is happening elsewhere present (or present again) is, therefore, a more complicated thing than it would seem. To clarify, representation can be read as what members of parliament do. They make the people present who have voted for them (or they should in any case). They are stand-ins. It is also what a photo or a video or a newspaper article does. It stands in for what happened somewhere, whether in the real world or on a stage or in a studio. Such standing-in produces something new though. Stuart Hall distinguished between three different ways to understand representation. We can think of representation as simply *reflection*. Then, it is always about words or video technique imitating the true meaning of an event or a person. Or we can bring in *intention*: what did the writer or director want us to think when reading or watching this? Hall himself preferred thinking of representation in terms of *construction*. In making sense of reality, we decipher relevant languages. We recognize how signs connect objects and meaning through codes and conventions. Hall points out that this means that representation does not happen after an original event: representation itself is constitutive of the event (see [Hall 1997](#), 16-64).

As media researchers, we know that media-created realities may appear lifelike and 'natural' but they are new images. Depending on what lens or filters have been used, what words are spoken or added as a tag, what is focused on and what is left out, we may interpret that new image very differently. Given that in representation something new comes into being, it will matter to people how they are repre-

sented: the media regularly get it wrong. Early feminist media critique spoke of 'symbolic annihilation' (Tuchman 1978). We still see far less women than men when we watch the news for instance. The media can be deeply invested in stereotypes that are a burden for those represented. Think of how women who wear a hijab are represented as victims. That lessens your chances to get a job as you are not seen as an independent woman who can make up her own mind.

Representation is closely related to stereotypes. In itself it is not a problem that we rely on shortcuts to ideas about (groups of) other people. It makes social interaction easier. When stereotypes become 'truth' though, there is a problem because stereotypes then flatten and reduce social reality and how it came into being. Notably, unequal power relations are lost. When you do audience research, it is important to check in with interviewees about how they 'identify'. That way you make sure you respect the other person's wishes and feelings. It helps you gain access to their world and meaning-making. When they themselves use stereotypes, you always need to ask follow-up questions to find out whether and with what kind of truths the stereotypes used are associated.

Ultimately, stereotypes are lodged in ideologies, or world views. As ideology denotes a comprehensive picture of how societies function, 'discourse' is often used as a slightly more manageable term. Discourse can simply mean talk. In the constructivist tradition that we are working in, discourse is taken to mean: everything that can and cannot be said about a particular subject within a specific context and a specific period. That may not sound that much smaller than 'ideology' but it is. A discourse can pertain to sexuality, to labor, to marriage. Where discourses overlap, interesting things happen, both in speech and in how we interpret social practices. For some, talking about sexuality will be a discussion of work. For others, it might be about marriage and, therefore, about property rights; for others, still it might be about love or about lust or about secrecy. For a constructivist, these large language

networks are always connected with social practices. That means that discourse does not only change because language changes over time but also because power relations in social practices work in such a way that rules and norms over how to understand the world or do things will be under pressure. To continue with the meanings of the word 'sex:' today they are vastly different from what sex was taken to be halfway through the twentieth century. We have moved from procreation and illicit pleasure, to freedom and emancipation, to self-expression and consent. Who knows what it will refer to in another 70 years given artificial intelligence and augmented reality developments.

Talking about meaning and meaning-making is about more than definitions, rules or norms. Feelings come into meaning-making as well. Feelings require coming into some form of body or spoken language. The moment feelings are 'performed', they are called emotions. Affect is a term often used to denote the engine behind the performance of feelings. Although a tricky term, it is useful to try and understand it as it points to how in interrelating with the world and with others, there is energy that we feel. Whether for good or bad, energy is generated all the time (Wetherell 2012). Sara Ahmed (2004) uses the term 'affective economies' to describe how emotions (or socially performed feelings) bind people together into collectivities, taking on a life of their own. In Ahmed's work, the example is Aryan Nation, a supremacist ultra-right wing group whose hatred of anyone not racially 'white' connects them. Remember how, above, we point to the difference between what people say and what they do. When speaking of affect, the same type of distinction holds: affect is what moves people, not what they are. The difference may be minimal, but for an audience researcher, it is important, e.g., not to assume that all avid viewers of a television show are fans. Fans, in this type of research, are those who define themselves as such.

A last concept in this second set is cultural citizenship. It refers to belonging. The citizenship part is about the rights and responsibilities

that we have. 'Cultural' refers to a specific kind of citizenship. In the 1980s, Renato Rosaldo wrote that cultural citizenship is "the right to difference" (1986). This is exactly what makes it an important concept: we use culture, including television or gaming, to learn about our rights and responsibilities, we exert and discuss them. For audience researchers, cultural citizenship refers to ongoing dialogue. It is spontaneous cultural and political critique that makes clear how emotion, affect and reasoning are deeply intertwined. Such critique often remains implicit. It needs us as researchers to understand how discipline and freedom unfold in the domain of culture as Toby Miller (2007) has put it. In Chapter 9, we use the concept to disentangle discussion of gender.

Third level: methodology

Television, social media, games, newspapers offer more than simple uses and gratifications, even if those are part of media use. They are entangled with processes of meaning-making and social power relations and themselves platforms of meaning-making that audiences reflect upon in an ultimately circular logic. What we need, therefore, are tools that allow us to approach audiences and media texts and practices with an open mind. Such tools are called methods. A set of interlinked methods and principles for using them is called a methodology. Methodologies link a particular philosophy or theory to an appropriate research method. They bridge philosophical notions and practical and applicable research strategies (Byrne 2001, 830).

This book's theory is that media are key sites of social meaning-making and, therefore, where culture is built and maintained. We also assume that media texts cannot *impose* how they are made meaningful (even if they can make powerful suggestions). We see individual subjects as 'nodal' points in the networks of meanings and material practices that make up a society. Although people use language as

given, they will, in using it, either change or confirm established meanings, norms and identities. Given the wealth of media texts and talk, we consider it unlikely that researchers will be able to find single texts as having an identifiable effect either on people or on social and cultural practices. At the same time, we recognize that this is exactly what many people think the media can do. Ideologically, our society tends to accord much power to the media. Our methods of research, therefore, have to allow for open and respectful conversations in which it is possible for researchers and the researched to disagree.

Media ethnography and its open research methods allow exactly that kind of respectful exchange. Most of its key terms such as meaning and social practice are easy to understand. A second set of methodological terms define the relationship of the researcher to the kind of knowledge they produce. Hammersley and Atkinson (2019) speak of naturalism and constructivism. Often used in this regard are also objectivity, subjectivity and reflexivity. They refer to whether as a researcher we are looking for and expect to find predefined (objective) knowledge; that we can only give our very own definitions of what we see (subjective knowledge) or that we can move back and forth between different perspectives on the world and take into account that all perspectives on it will have been shaped by the circumstances in which they were built (reflexivity). Because we believe that meaning is constructed, rather than given, we set great store by reflexivity. That means asking questions such as: how did it matter for the interview or the participant observation fieldwork that I am a woman or nonbinary, present as queer or cis-gender, that I am short or tall, Asian, of color, white, older or younger? How is my reading of a particular media text shaped by the contexts of my everyday life, my privileges, ability or disability, my early-life experiences and upbringing? How might the reading of that particular text have been shaped by other texts?

Such reflection needs to take place before doing empirical research. It is called examining your 'preconceived notions'. They should not

cloud your encounters with others. Researchers will often make a topic list with just a few key words to use in an interview which refer to the themes that are to be brought up in discussion. Such topic lists should not merely reflect your own ideas but allow for exploring what preconceptions and associative meanings they have for your informant. This is the reason that questionnaires are not often used in media ethnography. They tend to be built on closed questions and leave little room for the notions and ideas interviewees would like to bring to the conversation. They therefore give little insight into what ethnographers call 'members' categories': the terms and words used in a community that help to define the community's world.

Interviews are transcribed and are then called 'data'. Together with research memo's (the notes a researcher keeps in a diary, or a digital dated file), they are the basic research material that is then 'coded'. A code is simply a way of identifying with as little words as possible what is remarkable about a bit of interview. They are a way of summarizing what is said across different interviews when all the codes given are assembled and sorted into sets of similar meaning. As we are less interested in individuals than in collective meaning-making, we need analysis to bring out what is shared and what are idiosyncrasies (or the uniquely individual things that people say). Once the data (whether interview material or online discussions) are coded, open codes are 'clustered'. That is to say that they are brought together in groups to afford the researcher overview. This is an intuitive process. It usually takes several goes before a satisfactory list of open codes is drawn up and is clustered to satisfaction. Depending on the methodological approach used, these clusters are referred to as themes or as 'axial' codes.

The term axial code comes from grounded theory. Over the years, this mid-twentieth-century method of data analysis and generating theory has been shaped into a handy schematic for qualitative research. It organizes data reduction and analysis (going from the full transcripts to a list and then to clusters of codes) in three steps. The

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first two are *open* and *axial* coding. In axial coding, clusters are named that provide an overview focused on how meaning is made collectively across the group of interviewees or the data set used, which, e.g., consists of a Reddit discussion, or TV Time or YouTube comments. A careful check of the underlying quotes of the axial codes brings out whether the open codes worked well and the quotes share a way of referencing a particular phenomenon. The axial code 'television is dangerous' can refer back to quotes about limiting viewing time, to violent content or even to commercialism and commodification. In a larger research project, there will be a significant number of axial codes which then are further reduced by grouping them into 'selective' codes. The selective codes are the first step in the storytelling that the research article, report or thesis will do.

Research example: a coding tree in practice

Not so difficult to guess perhaps what this research project was about? At the same time, without quotes from the original material, which were interview transcripts conducted by Sarieke Hoeksma for her MA thesis, it can be hard to follow the logic of coding tree.

<i>Open Coding</i>	<i>Axial Coding</i>	<i>Selective Coding</i>
boys typically boys typical boys girls typically girls typically girl aggression pink tough	nature versus nurture to be yourself to be protected risk zone gender experiments are a phase Television is dangerous	'Be who you are' 'Big, bad world' 'Do not hold me accountable'

what children prefer good television viewing habits bad television view- ing habits nostalgia commercialization		
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These are codes given in interviews with parents. The project was meant to identify ways in which gender conventions could become less dichotomous in children's television. Instead of being enlisted for change, as Hoeksma had expected, the parents offered three completely different interpretative repertoires to talk about raising children and the role of television. Selective coding showed they managed to combine deeply liberal convictions (Be who you are), with great fear of bullying and how unforgiving society is to individuals who present as 'different' (big, bad world) and feeling that parents have a tough job: children will do their own thing (Do not hold me accountable). Needless to say, they saw television as a potential risk and certainly were not advocates of television putting ideas in their children's heads (see [Hermes and Hoeksma 2024](#)).

Selective codes can deliver themes (at a higher level of abstraction than axial codes do) but also 'repertoires', 'discourses', 'vocabularies' or 'frames'. Which of these terms is used is really a matter of personal preference of a researcher. When using *repertoire*, the reconstruction of the structure of meaning-making around a certain subject or related to a set of media texts or practices is tied to recurring patterns of speech ([Wetherell](#) and [Potter 1988](#)). *Discourse* tends to refer to combinations of talk and material, social practices. *Vocabulary* can be preferred when groups or contexts are compared. It denotes appropriate ways of expressing oneself. *Frames* was introduced by Goffman. It

makes clear how when some things are focused on and are taken into account, others stay outside of the frame and are declared to not be relevant or of interest. It gives a good sense of the constructedness of social meaning-making.

Interviewee, respondent, participant?

Viewers, listeners, users, fans, commenters, haters or dislikers – audience members have many names. Once they become part of a research project, there are even more: in ethnography, they are called informants. In a design project, they are either participants or (end) users. And in qualitative research project, they will usually be called an interviewee or a participant. In quantitative research, individuals disappear, and they are subsumed under the number of questionnaires that were completed ($n = \dots$) and called respondents. Throughout this book, we mostly use 'interviewee' and 'participant' to highlight the agency and participation of, well, our participants in practices of meaning-making.

In visual and textual analysis and in sensory ethnography, additional concepts will come to the fore. As these are not key terms for qualitative audience research generally, they will not be focused on here. What is important to know is that we like qualitative audience research for how it allows us to combine the interpretation of texts and images with the ways in which they are made meaning of. We have no ultimate preference for the order in which these different parts of a project are undertaken. When a researcher has practiced working self-reflexively and is aware of her preconceived notions, she will not let the outcome of visual analysis or autoethnography (in which the researcher becomes her own research subject) blind her to what audiences say. If you are feeling you might still have a way to go in learning how to do this, we highly recommend *audience-led* forms of textual and visual analysis so that the voice of others is given proper attention.