

Media Effects: Methods of Critical Audience Studies

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Ontology and epistemology

Research methods for critical audience studies are built on a specific ontology (which covers the question of what the world is made of) and a specific epistemology (which answers the question of how we can know or study it). Since the main objects of research in critical audience studies are people in interaction with their media, it is considered crucial to understand how people themselves experience and formulate these interactions. The main goal for the critical audience researcher is therefore to recover, through a wide variety of research designs and methods, people's own voice about their media use, be they the classic "old" media or the new ones, which require concrete interaction and activity from audiences. What is more, the adjective *critical* means that scholars in this field postulate that people's experiences are not entirely free or voluntary but always embedded in social relations. This leads to the question as to whether individual autonomy is possible in interactions with media or whether these interactions are entirely determined by economic, social, and cultural forces in society. Obviously the answer to this question will vary according to specific individuals, groups, situations, and contexts, making the articulation of individual agency in relation to social structures a crucial empirical one for critical audience studies.

The experienced sociological reader will recognize two strands of theory here. The first one is the social construction of reality, as developed by Berger and Luckmann (1967). In their by now classic text, these authors argued that the social world is fundamentally different from the natural world, in the sense that the social world does not exist independently but only through the interpretations and meaning-making activities of people. Berger and Luckmann proposed a specific development by which people come to understand social reality. First, through everyday interactions and conversations, particular common understandings emerge of other people, situations, and interactions; then these become ever more common and habitual and eventually turn into "institutions." It is important to understand that, in social construction theory, such institutions are not simply concrete organizations but also (and especially) social arrangements such as "marriage," "the family" or "religion."

A second strand of theory that is key to understanding the methods of critical audience studies concerns the question of structure and agency, which has fostered an ongoing debate in sociological theory. The work of British sociologist Anthony Giddens

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(1988) has been crucial here, because of the way he removed the dualism in the debate by arguing that one does not need to refer to complete determination by structures on the one hand versus complete individual freedom on the other. Instead, Giddens's theory of "structuration" suggests that people have different ways of coming to terms with structures, accommodating them, negating them, denying them, and so on. The more people are able to recognize how they interact with structures, the more emancipatory potential they have to change them.

While this entry does not claim that all critical audience studies directly build on social constructivist and structuration theory, they do share the main assumption that people construct their own meanings, but not in situations of their own making, to paraphrase an old Marxist dogma. The research designs that follow from this starting point of necessity seek ways for researchers to understand the world through the eyes of the people they research, to let these people have their own say, and—in particular research setups—to help them emancipate themselves and change.

Research designs

There are a number of research designs that fit the theoretical premises of critical audience studies. The most used ones are ethnography and audience-cum-content designs. Some studies can be described as participatory action designs, meaning that they combine researching particular audience groups with developing means to empower them.

Ethnography

In the 1980s and 1990s, strong claims were made by critical audience scholars that the only way to really "know" the audience was through ethnographic research that would enable the observation, analysis, and understanding of the way audiences themselves frame their media experiences and activities and how these are socially and discursively situated. A fairly typical comment is, for instance: "I believe that a critical ethnographic practice best equips us to map out the media's varied uses and meanings for particular social subjects in particular cultural contexts" (Moore, 1993, p. 1). Nevertheless, a key debate at the time was whether the many reception studies that emerged really deserved the label of "ethnography." Despite ongoing writing about the importance of all of everyday life for the understanding of audience experiences, very few studies engaged the daily immersion of the people researched into media consumption and audience practices. Nightingale (1993), for instance, describes how most reception studies use ethnographic techniques of data collection—which, for that matter, are shared with all qualitative social and cultural sciences (see below)—rather than following an ethnographic design or research strategy. Ien Ang (2001), one of the leading theorists of critical audience studies at the time, therefore concluded that most audience research has ethnographic intentions and approaches rather than deserving to be called ethnography "proper."

An important exception was Marie Gillespie's study on the usage of audiovisual media by young Punjabi Londoners, which was based both on her experience with this

group as a teacher and on her systematic fieldwork, characterized as “a multiplicity of data gathering strategies, in a variety of contexts, drawing upon the experiences of a wide range of people over a long period of time” (Gillespie, 1995, p. 60). Conducting ethnographies with particular groups of media users has become much easier with the emergence of the Internet, online fan communities, or gamer collectives. Nancy Baym’s (2000) study of online fan discussions about soap operas, for instance, covered 4 years, in which she both participated and observed the women discussing their favorite soaps and their everyday lives alike. Similarly, the study of online gaming communities has been conducted by researcher-gamers who immersed themselves in particular games, participating and observing at the same time (see Boellstorff, 2008).

Whether focused on traditional or new media or on their interaction, ethnographic designs in this field involve a number of common elements: prolonged presence in the field of study; multiple methods of data collection and analysis; a reflection on the role of the researcher as both participant and scholar; and analyses aimed at retracing the perspectives of the people or community studied. When the matter is put like this, it becomes clear that such studies are closely related to anthropology—and in fact one sees some of the best critical “audience” studies coming from anthropologists. Tom Boellstorff (2008), for instance, spent 2 years of fieldwork in the online virtual world of Second Life, using the ethnographic methods and experience he gained during earlier fieldwork in Indonesia. However, despite the rich emic insights that audience ethnographies produce, a recurring criticism against them is that the specific features of media texts or virtual designs disappear from the analysis. Studies that do acknowledge this specificity go under the name of “audience-cum-content” design.

Audience-cum-content

The term *audience-cum-content design* was coined by Klaus Bruhn Jensen in 2002 (in Jankowski & Jensen, 2002), and entails combining an analysis of the content of media with a study of how audiences use and interpret this content. It relates to the notion of “decoding” in the encoding–decoding model of Stuart Hall, which postulates that audiences actively interpret specific features of media text to make their own meanings and are not passive recipients of the meanings put in media texts by producers. While somewhat obvious in the twenty-first century, when much media content comes to audiences in the form of semifinished products that acquire meaning through one’s own actions (social media, games), in the TV age the notion of decoding was a relevant intervention in the somewhat mechanical ideas about media consumption put forth by both psychologists and critical scholars. In line with the premise of critical audience studies that audiences make meaning within the limits of economic, social, and cultural structures, this design involves a dual strategy of analyzing both textual features and the audiences’ interpretations of them. Of necessity this involves a combination of forms of content analysis and of audience studies in a limited time span.

The Nationwide Project conducted by Charlotte Brunsdon and David Morley in the 1980s is considered a seminal example of this kind of design, combining as it did a discursive analysis of the news values and ideological themes in the British current affairs

program of the same name with a series of focus groups of different social groups discussing two specific episodes (Morley & Brunson, 1999). A more recent example can be found in a study by Fien Adriaens (2010), which combines a textual analysis of the Flemish remake of *Ugly Betty* with a series of focus groups among young women of Moroccan descent to find out whether and how such cross-cultural productions offer resources for identification and pleasure.

One could think that the audience-cum-content design is less relevant for the “newer” forms of media, which depend less on content and more on audience activity. However, the particular approach of audience-cum-content designs, which is analyzing how particular content features make audience interpretations possible or impossible, resonates in research about games and social media, particularly in studies that combine the specific “affordances” of digital culture with actual usage by active audiences. If one recognizes that the architecture of online offers makes some actions possible while disabling others, the question of relevance is how certain affordances invite a certain usage. This requires a combined analysis of features of the website, platform, app, and so on with an analysis of usage by particular groups. For both old and new media, an audience-cum-content design entails an acknowledgment of the joint contribution of content (understood widely as text, visuals, audio, interactivity, and so on) and audience to the process of meaning making; collection of data about both elements, often leading to qualitative rather than quantitative results; and analyzing these data separately, but with an eye on the interactions between content and audience.

Participatory action

Given the premises of critical audience studies that audiences actively make meaning in socially structured situations, it should not come as a surprise that some studies have a particular goal of making audiences more aware of their situation and willing to improve it, through their active and relatively autonomous involvement in the research endeavor. This kind of research, known as “participatory action research” (PAR), is rooted in the works of Kurt Lewin (1946), who believed that scholars should conduct research that has both an academic purpose and the potential to solve societal problems, especially problems from which the deprived and needy suffer most. As a Jew who had to flee Nazi Germany, Lewin himself had a special interest in helping ethnic minority groups. Although the meaning of the key concept—participation—is very diverse in media studies, participatory action research has some consistent dimensions and has come to be seen as a design that is useful especially for social groups that are in need of empowerment and whose perspectives are hard to fully understand by relative “outsiders.” This encompasses not only ethnic minority groups, but also young people and the elderly, women, ill or disabled people, religiously or politically pursued people, the homeless, and so on.

PAR can then take two forms: In the first variety, media of various kinds are used by respondents to voice their own concerns. Common examples are photovoice, in which research participants try to capture their experiences by making specific pictures, and video diaries, in which research participants film their experiences. The resulting “data” of images can be used either as a trigger for further conversation or as

meaningful material in itself, representing participants' experiences in the same ways as spoken words would (see Wang, Cash, & Powers, 2000 for an overview). In the second variety of PAR-inspired media studies, the design is aimed at helping audiences make critical sense of media content through various activities. Such versions of PAR are often collated under the heading of media literacy projects. Christine Wijnen and Sascha Trültzsch (2014), for instance, used a collaborative peer-to-peer discussion approach in order to enable youth to critically reflect on the production of the reality TV show *Next Top Model*. The goal of their other study, carried out in Germany, was to promote "digital literacy" among youth in their use of social network sites. In a similar vein, Jackson and Vares (2015) asked girls to make video diaries to "talk back" to the sexualized images of mainstream culture and insert their own visuals into the debate.

PAR thus generates the concrete involvement of audiences in the research process by having them contribute, among other things, to the development of research questions and methods, to the collection and analysis of data, and to the interpretation of findings.

Methods for data collection

The main empirical data collection methods on which the research designs mentioned above rely will be briefly outlined in this section. Like the designs, the methods of data collection have to match the ontological and epistemological assumptions of critical audience studies, which means that both the constructed nature of social reality and the voices of audiences themselves need to be centralized. We will first focus on different ways of collecting audience data.

Collecting audience data

In general, one can distinguish between unobtrusive and obtrusive ways to collect data. Unobtrusive ways are those procedures for data collection of which audiences are not aware and that do not intervene in their everyday lifeworlds and activities. They are also called nonreactive methods, as the researcher him- or herself does not elicit reactions from audiences. These kinds of data can be collected from all public occasions where people express their responses to media content. In previous times these would be, for instance, letters to the editor, fan mail or meet-and-greets, or everyday observations about media use and talk; currently such occasions involve scraping data from all the Internet sites and social media where people respond to media or produce their own content about media (fan sites and fiction in particular). Second-screen data from Twitter and Facebook activity about TV viewing are particularly relevant in this respect. In fact, during television's prime time in the evening, most Twitter traffic appears to be about television, thus producing a mass of unobtrusive data about viewing behavior. As these online data can quickly become too massive to handle qualitatively, web analytics are becoming more and more popular in audience studies. Given their quantitative distance metric, they do not, in themselves, match the epistemological and ontological assumptions of critical audience studies, which centralize the experience of audiences under structural constraints (see above). However, in combination with

the qualitative analysis of a selection of comments and tweets, for instance, they yield useful data for understanding and analyzing audiences within the critical audience studies approach.

A much less common unobtrusive method of real-life data collection is the observation—either participating or nonparticipating—of concrete audience behavior and practice. This kind of research is relatively rare; it would involve ongoing participation in and observations of media audiences in everyday life situations, and it would be difficult to conduct in practice. Also, to make this a really unobtrusive method, the researcher would have to go undercover and not reveal her- or himself as a researcher. Such an approach raises all kinds of ethical issues and is usually not considered acceptable research practice. Even if one does research in the semipublic spaces of the Internet, it is considered good practice to introduce oneself as a researcher interested in the particular online community that one moves into.

The advantages of unobtrusive methods are clear, as they suggest the researcher's unmitigated access to the lifeworlds and experience of audiences. The researcher supposedly gets to know processes and patterns of media reception "as they are in real life," in the absence of any possible bias that his or her intervention would generate. On the other hand, unobtrusive methods are subject to serious ethical considerations with respect to the researcher's appropriate conduct and to respondents' privacy and anonymity. As a result of these practical and ethical issues, the more common way to study audiences is through concrete and explicit researcher–audience interactions, in other words through obtrusive or reactive methods.

One of the common reactive methods for examining audience reception of media texts and culture is the face-to-face interview with individual or groups of audience members. Open, unstructured interviews ought to give interviewees the opportunity to freely express their feelings and thoughts, and are therefore considered an appropriate method for assessing audiences' own media experience. The space in which participants can express their views in and on their own terms is deemed to be significantly smaller in other methods. In quantitative questionnaires, most notably, the researcher is bound to frame and mold the data about research participants through (among other things) the selection, phrasing, and sequencing of the questions that are asked and the limited answer options that are offered. In unstructured interviews, researchers try to avoid such restraints by asking their interviewees as open questions as possible and by considering the full conversation—including pauses, smiles, and coughs—as their data. This involves, methodologically, not only a careful consideration of how to word open questions, but also consistent techniques for how to listen and encourage people to expand their thoughts. While the interview is often considered an "easy" method of data collection, it is in fact one of the most difficult ones to do well and delivers superficial data when done badly.

Focus groups, usually conducted with five to seven people, are a similarly reactive method, where it is clear for people that they are participating in research. In some cases the participants are especially recruited for the focus groups; in others existing social groups are used. This depends on the purpose of the research. Focus groups have the additional advantage over the open interview in that they allow the observation of interaction between group members, thus better resembling everyday social processes

of media use and interpretation, but also revealing possible processes of domination between group members. A combination of data from interviews and focus groups with the same set of respondents therefore possibly provides the most comprehensive information about the interaction between individual and social processes among audiences.

The researcher is crucial to both interviews and focus groups, as much depends on his or her capacity to relate to the research participants through good questioning and listening, through recognizing and acknowledging participants' perspectives and understanding group processes. In research with vulnerable groups especially, there is the additional challenge of the researcher's being seen as an authority, an outsider, or a member of the elite. All such perceptions work against his or her gaining the emic understanding of audiences that critical scholars try to acquire. A method of gaining credence is the peer-to-peer interview, in which audience members interview one another and their peers, without intervention from the researcher (see Warr, Mann, & Tacticos, 2011). In fact such a collaborative approach to audience research is common in participatory audience designs (see above) and can include the whole research cycle, from developing the research question to choosing the design, formulating the operational questions, and doing the analysis.

Content-oriented methods

Data collection methods for media content are—evidently—important in audience-content designs. Content may seem easier to collect and analyze than audience data, since content seems easily present. Newspaper copies or a particular episode of a TV program, for instance, may be retrieved from an archive center or from the Internet. The collection of data, then, seems rather straightforward and does not require distinct techniques (which is not to say that searching and finding such data cannot be a tiresome and long process). However, newer forms of digital media often involve a more elaborate process. Most notably, downloading broad and substantial selections of data on the content that social media users produce (e.g., what is said, by whom, when) and on the ways in which social media users are connected to one another is often not enabled by social media platforms themselves. Also, because such contents are generally dispersed and fluid, researchers need so-called “social media scrapers” to select them systematically and to download them fully and efficiently. The downside of these techniques is that the searching algorithms on which they are based are often opaque due to their technical complexity and secretive for commercial reasons, which makes it difficult for researchers to know the scope of their data.

The most important challenge for critical audience scholars, however, is to use an analytical method that does justice to the premise that media texts have no singular meaning but that their meanings come into being through the interpretative processes of audiences or users. Thus the analytical method needs to be able to identify how open or closed the text is to different interpretations, and also what kind of interpretations are likely to emerge. Analytical methods that are suited for such a requirements come from structuralism, semiotics, and narrative research (Berger, 2014). These methods have in common that they identify the elements of content that may convey meanings (signs), but also assess which elements are absent. In addition, they look at how these

elements are combined with or contrasted to one another; whether and how they change with the unfolding of the narrative in the text; and how they speak to elements outside of the text, through purposive or accidental intertextuality. They thus produce insight into the (combination of) elements that are likely to lead to particular audience interpretations, instead of assessing the definitive meanings that the text conveys. In an audience-cum-content design, the assumption is that such definitive meaning is produced by the audience in negotiation with the text instead of in submission to it.

Data analysis

In contrast to the extensive attention within critical audience research for epistemological issues, design choices, and researcher–researched interactions (e.g., Carpentier, Schröder, & Hallet, 2013), much less discussion has taken place on the best way to analyze the data coming from ethnographic or audience-cum-content designs. The overwhelming majority of these data take the form of texts: transcripts of focus groups and interviews; field notes of observations; registrations of online chat and comments. Occasionally a creative method, like photovoice or mood board making, produces visual data. There is no agreed set of methods and techniques for analyzing these data, apart from the fact that there is consensus about the need to code, categorize, and interpret them. But how exactly that can be done is a relatively neglected matter in critical audience studies, and researchers have been following a range of different methodologies, such as grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), critical discourse analysis (Van Dijk, 1993), qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), narrative analysis (Labov & Waletzky, 1997), conversation analysis (Ten Have, 2007), or repertoire analysis (Wetherell, 1998). These approaches differ considerably among themselves with respect to their proposed units of analysis and their analytical procedures, which often lack a clear-cut set of methods of how to do it (e.g., Lunt & Livingstone, 1996). In other words, while the methodologies in critical audience studies are well developed and thought through, the methods and tools are somewhat undefined and unclear, which—for that matter—holds for other fields of qualitative research as well. The novice in this field is referred to the classic handbook of Miles and Huberman (1984/2015) and the recent guide to qualitative coding by Saldana (2015).

The only tool that has gained wide popularity and somewhat of a consensus within qualitative research and critical audience studies is computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS). The most well-known programs are Atlas.ti, NVivo, MAXqda, and Nud.ist, which contain functions for the systematic searching and coding of large amounts of texts. Many researchers (e.g., Carvajal, 2002) have warned against the misconception that such software also helps in the development and analysis of codes, or offers ready-made standards of interpretation (as software for quantitative analysis does). CAQDAS is most relevant for the management of textual data, but many researchers claim that it cannot replace the analytical and interpretative process that is conducted by the researcher her- or himself (e.g., Liamputtong, 2009).

Quality control

In critical audience studies the role of the researcher is fundamentally different from that of the researcher using an approach from media or social psychology. The latter works with well-delineated designs, a clear-cut set of validated measurement instruments, established rules for data collection, and objectified criteria to assess results for relevance, provided for instance by tests of significance. Validity, reliability, and robustness are the three key properties through which the quality of the research is assessed. Within such a context, it is hard, and in fact undesirable, for the researcher to deviate from the rules developed by the academic community and to insert an individual perspective into the research. The researcher is trained to be a neutral analytical instrument that could be replaced by another without loss in quality. In critical audience studies and qualitative research in general, the researcher is a much more prominent, indeed a crucial component of the whole research cycle. This expresses itself, to begin with, in situations of data collection through in-depth interviews or focus groups, where much depends on the empathetic and conversational skills of the researcher. In addition, the absence of a common agreement about analytical methodologies and tools leaves the researcher much space in which to follow her own procedures and construct her own interpretations. As Miles and Huberman (1984/2015, p. 230) famously suggested, the researcher has a vertical monopoly in the research process. To counter the critique of idiosyncrasy and impressionism, the qualitative research community has resisted the tendency to come up with a set of quality criteria of its own (dismissed as “criteriology” by Seale, 1999), but has focused instead on a number of strategies designed to enhance the quality of research. What quality is in critical audience studies derives from its epistemology and ontology, which together suggest that research outcomes should reflect how audiences themselves experience and formulate their interactions with media, acknowledging that this is not an autonomous process but one both limited and enabled by structures of power. A combination of internal and external research strategies brings that ideal closer. Internal quality strategies are those that are conducted within the project, and in particular the following:

- *Triangulation.* Using multiple methods in the project enhances the chance that the outcomes offer a comprehensive picture of audience experiences. One can distinguish theory triangulation, data triangulation, and method triangulation (Denzin, 2006).
- *Peer debriefing or investigator triangulation.* This consists of involving fellow researchers in the research by having them conduct a part of the data collection and/or analysis and/or read and comment on the research reports.
- *Comparison or environment triangulation.* This consists of constructing different groups among the audience group to be researched, or in encountering them in different settings. Such comparison is not for the purpose of producing analyses of these different groups and situations, but for revealing as many dimensions as possible of the audience experience (see Yin, 2013).

- *Exceptionalism*. A careful analysis of extraordinary, exceptional individuals or experiences among audiences will make the overall tendencies clearer, as testified also in the commonsense adagio that the exception tests the rule.
- *Transparency*. In the absence of rigid procedures that are shared by the qualitative research community, it is crucial that researchers monitor and register their research decisions meticulously and make them available for peer scrutiny by supervisors, peers, or reviewers. This involves, among other things, coding logs, analytical and reflexive memos that some researchers collect in their own public research blogs (e.g., Kjellberg, 2010).

The main purpose of critical audience research has to be assessed outside the research cycle itself. How does one know, in the end, whether the research has indeed given audiences their own voice? The only way, it seems, is to present and discuss research outcomes with those who have been researched and to leave space and time for adjusting the results if necessary. Labeled divergently as participant feedback, respondent validation, or member checks, such discussions can occur at different stages of the research process: having research participants check their transcripts or observation notes about them; having them respond to tentative interpretations and conclusions; having them read the final report. All of this implies that member checks not only are a means to check the fit of the research with the experience of the audience under scrutiny, but also will deliver new insights and enrich existing data (see Torrance, 2012).

When one takes this further, for instance by also involving research participants in formulating the question and the design of the research, one moves in the direction of participatory action research, where the goal to let the research speak in the voice of the researched is part of the whole setup, and not simply a retrospective checkpoint of quality (see above).

Reflection

As will have become clear throughout this entry, the field of critical audience studies is wide and diverse. In addition, the object of research is changing with the changing media landscape, leading scholars to rapidly move away from old media to new ones, for example from TV audiences to gaming communities to social media “producers.” As a result, in critical audience studies there is no such thing as “normal science” involving a set of commonly accepted theories, research methodologies, and empirical evidence on which scholars have expanded and built for decades. The research field is as unruly as its object, audiences, which themselves move between different kinds of media, genres, and platforms. Another factor hindering the development of a better anchored set of methodologies and methods is that most academic publishers, whether of books or of journals, do not necessarily offer space for the kind of qualitative methodological detail that includes for instance coding logs and analytical memos necessary to fulfill the requirements of transparency. One of the few journals that does this is *Participations: Journal of Audience & Reception Studies*, which allows authors ample room to report their research trajectory. The critical audience researcher is otherwise mostly

dependent on general publications about qualitative research, which offer a wide range of methodological discussions and tools but relatively little that directly relates to the core questions of critical audience studies.

SEE ALSO: Encoding and Decoding; False Consciousness and Media Effects; Intertextuality; Media Effects: Methods of Hypothesis Testing; Reception

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