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Introduction: Exploring the methodological synergies of multimethod audience research

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Multimethod research has now become so widespread in the audience research community – as in the social and human sciences in general – that it is surrounded by what one could almost term a dangerous obviousness. The editors of this Special Section of *Participations* have the impression that audience researchers sometimes adopt a mixed methods approach without really thinking through what they are doing and why, and sometimes also without possessing the craftsmanship required to produce quality research.

The obviousness with which many scholars today embrace the notion of methodological pluralism is dangerous because researchers tend to forget, or deliberately not care about, a number of concerns which are crucial to the proper performance of

multimethod research designs. One such concern has to do with ignoring the historical legacy of the different methodologies and their accompanying toolboxes of data *collection* (or as some traditions insist: data *production*), data *analysis and interpretation* (which some traditions would insist on separating, while others insist on their inseparability), and procedures of *generalizing* the analytical findings (the very feasibility of which is in some (qualitative) quarters denied). We would argue that an acute awareness of the historical fault lines between methodological paradigms is essential to understanding the distinctive tasks for which the different methods are uniquely suited.

Secondly, and related to the first concern, if the mixing of methods becomes the obvious thing to do, researchers tend to gloss over the epistemological differences that exist between the paradigms and methodologies. Some speak glibly about ‘complementarity’ of methods and of findings obtained with different methods, without properly defining what complementarity means. If a method is a lens that enables us to see and understand our objects of investigation more clearly, should we expect the view provided by another method, or lens, to corroborate the view produced by the former (as those who describe their multi-method work as ‘triangulation’ are prone to do), or should we rather look for the way it produces an alternative view of our analytical object?

In all fairness, however, there are also many who do not just “think of research methods as techniques of data collection or analysis that are not (...) encumbered by epistemological and ontological baggage” (Bryman 2001: 454), but who try to face this ‘baggage’ by exploring new epistemological coherences, for instance within a critical realist philosophy of science (Danermark et al. 2002), or who anchor their application of mixed methods within the framework of ‘mixed ontologies’ (Höijer 2008).

Thirdly, and finally, the obviousness of methodological pluralism sometimes tends to equate it with the simple (sic!) mixing of qualitative and quantitative methodologies, thereby forgetting that it is possible to mix methods both within and between these paradigms, and to mix an audience analysis using methods from either of these paradigms with other kinds of media research, for instance a political economy analysis of media production, not to mention the possibility of mixing methods not by applying them sequentially, but by fusing them into one common fieldwork design (Greene 2007).

Although multimethod audience research is not a new phenomenon, we believe that with the emergence of the ‘mediatized’ society characterized by media digitization and convergence, the need to cross-fertilize scholarly paradigms has acquired a new urgency. In this Special Section we try to meet these challenges through a collection of articles which collectively manage to cover a large section of the terrain of multimethod audience research. Across these eight articles we aim to develop a candid and constructive dialogue within the audience research community between different scholarly approaches to the exploration of audience practices and meanings. We have brought together examples of academic work which combine a variety of theoretical and methodological perspectives,

and practice multimethod research by combining practical analysis and solid empirical experiences with epistemological, theoretical, and methodological reflection.

Within this Section, then, we hope to demonstrate and discuss how precisely dialogues between research paradigms within audience research may contribute to enhance the explanatory power of theory-driven fieldwork studies of contemporary media audiences. Rooted in different research traditions – from a more behavioural ‘media choice’ perspective to a more sense-making ‘mediatized worlds’ perspective – the contributors are in a manner of speaking comparing notes, based on their different disciplinary frameworks, their different but overlapping foci (or knowledge interests), the scope of their empirical work on different kinds of audience practice, their objectives, and their preferred methodologies.

Notably the contributors are not just comparing notes in a metaphorical sense. Most of them belong to the European COST network *Transforming Audiences – Transforming Societies* (<http://www.cost-transforming-audiences.eu/>), which has as one of its central objectives to promote cross-paradigm dialogue. The idea of this Section was thus conceived during a panel at the *Transforming Audiences 3* conference held at the University of Westminster, London, in 2011, planned by the guest editors and in which several of the contributors participated.

The article by Alexander Dhoest, “Mixed methods, bifocal vision: Combining quantitative and qualitative data to public service performance” can be said to represent a mixed methods ‘classic’ perspective, as it demonstrates how a combination of quantitative and qualitative insights can lead to different policy implications for the regulation of public service media institutions. Only by combining these approaches, Dhoest argues, can we begin to understand some of the complexity and seeming contradictions in audience expectations and responses to public broadcasting.

Nóra Nyirő also explores the benefits to be reaped from the complementary and consecutive application of quantitative and qualitative methods. Inspired by the demanding ‘nested analysis’ approach, but also deviating from and adapting it to suit the purpose at hand, her article “Nested analysis based mixed method research of television and video recording audiences” demonstrates how iterative hypothesis-testing with an alternating series of three qualitative small sample studies and three quantitative large-sample studies can build and refine a model of understanding which has greater validity than any single-method study would produce.

Three of the contributions explore the sense-making and practices of film audiences. Karina Aveyard in her article “Observation, mediation and intervention: An account of methodological fusion in the study of rural cinema audiences in Australia” combines ethnographic, narrative and social anthropology methods, in a mixed methods rationale designed to provide complementary perspectives on the ways in which cinema-going shape the experience of everyday life. The combination of methods enabled her study to underpin a more detailed account of what rural cinema means in rural communities.

A similar knowledge interest, but directed towards the difficult issue of historical film audience research, was a driving force in the study by Daniël Biltreyst, Kathleen Lotze and Philippe Meers, “Triangulation in historical audience research: reflections and experiences from a multi-methodological research project on cinema audiences in Flanders”. Combining cinema programming analysis, political economy-based socio-geographical analysis of the film exhibition scene in Flemish cities, and oral history audience research, the authors are able to paint a fuller picture of cinema-going as a social routine inspired by community identity formation and social distinction.

In their article “Researching world audiences: the experience of a complex methodology”, Martin Barker and Ernest Mathijs explore the experience, from the international *Lord of the Rings* audience research project, of fusing qualitative and quantitative research processes into the framework of one implement. They put the spotlight on ways in which their design tried to build the essentials of a qualitative, dialogical mind-set into the framework of a quantitative questionnaire, in order to reveal in more complex ways how the films mattered in diverse ways to worldwide audiences. Ambitiously, they discuss how such a strategy may ultimately be used to illuminate how central theoretical concepts like interpretive communities and imagined communities can be better understood.

The intent to not sequentially juxtapose but to synthesize qualitative and quantitative ways of knowing into one fieldwork implement also drives Kim Christian Schrøder’s study of audiences’ building of news media repertoires in the context of cross-media news consumption. As his title indicates (“Methodological pluralism as a vehicle of qualitative generalization”), his mixed methods approach has nothing to do with ‘complementarity’. Instead it seeks to tailor the quantitative method known as Q-methodology to serve as a quantitative translation device which, when applied to a qualitative interview scenario, enables the qualitative researcher to overcome the opacity that usually accompanies qualitative generalization.

Uwe Hasebrink and Hanna Domeyer’s article “Media repertoires as patterns of behaviour and as meaningful practices. A multimethod approach to media use in converging media environments” uses a mixed methods approach to illuminate the scope and implications of their original theoretical concept of ‘media repertoires’. In this empirical endeavour quantitative and qualitative methods – and their corresponding epistemologies – are complementary in the sense that neither takes precedence over the other as knowledge-building tools, together they deliver the two sides of a coin: they are both necessary in order to explain audiences’ trans-media practices as resulting simultaneously from selective behaviour and everyday sense-making processes.

Finally, in the article “When two worlds meet: An interparadigmatic mixed method approach to convergent audiovisual media consumption” Cédric Courtois demonstrates how one can combine two theoretical paradigms: socio-cognitive uses-and-gratifications research and domestication theoretical reception research, both anchored in a

constructivist ontology. The objective of such a combination is, on the one hand, to obtain a broad picture of the role played by psychological motives and the weight of habit in audiences' selective cross-media practices, and on the other hand to reach a deeper understanding of the ways in which media (along the triple articulations of technologies, texts, and contexts) are meaningfully domesticated in everyday life.

As this brief presentation of the eight contributions shows, we here bring together researchers who may have their scholarly origins in different research paradigms (such as behavioural, cognitive and sense-making approaches), but who are all keen to explore theoretically and empirically the complementarities and synergies of following different methodological paths, and to reflect on the explanatory benefits of doing so. We hope that this special issue may facilitate dialogues about multimethod research in different scientific fora, and even lead to new initiatives of cross-approach collaboration.

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