

Methodological pluralism as a vehicle of qualitative generalization

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Abstract:

This article proposes an innovative framework for making analytical generalizations in qualitative research. In order to achieve this purpose it contends that the multi-methodological strategy, now readily accepted in many qualitative quarters, of mixing qualitative and quantitative methods by applying them one after the other in a *sequential* manner can be supplemented by a multimethod strategy which combines qualitative and quantitative in an *integrative* manner which synthesizes the two approaches into one empirical design. The article argues that by combining qualitative and quantitative analysis and interpretation of the same data material using the Q-methodological approach it is possible to overcome interpretive opacity – always the Achilles’ heel of an exclusively qualitative procedure of generalization. The proposal is substantiated empirically by applying the integrative approach to a study of how citizen-consumers navigating in the cross-media news landscape can be represented in a typology of seven news media repertoires. The last part of the article discusses two different epistemological lenses for methodological pluralism termed the ‘different knowledges’ perspective and the ‘common knowledge’ perspective; it is the latter of these, inspired by critical realism, which makes it possible to build a sound epistemological foundation for the multi-method endeavor.

Keywords: qualitative and quantitative methods, generalization, Q-methodology, typology, epistemology, news, reception

This article is based on the premise that qualitative media audience research should – sometimes, if not always – aim at producing general knowledge. The contention following from this premise is that in order to be capable of producing such general knowledge about audience practices and sense-making with sufficient reliability and validity, qualitative audience research should – when the particular research question invites it – adopt a strategy of methodological pluralism.

Moreover it is here contended that the multi-methodological strategy, now readily accepted in many qualitative quarters, of mixing qualitative and quantitative methods by applying them one after the other in a *sequential* manner can be supplemented by a multimethod strategy which combines qualitative and quantitative in an *integrative* manner which synthesizes the two approaches into one empirical design. Seeking inspiration for such an endeavor in standard methodological tools from both traditions, this article argues that an innovative custom-made version of the method known as Q-methodology can open up a new path of insight which, in a manner of speaking, delivers ‘the best of both worlds’, in terms of the resulting generalizing explanatory power (Schrøder 2004; Schrøder & Kobbernagel 2010; Davis & Michelle 2012).

It is not the case, of course, that a qualitative method used in isolation is incapable of generalizing beyond particular situations and cases (Larsson 2009; Halkier 2011); the historical record of qualitative audience research is rich in examples of studies which have produced generalizing maps of specific audience landscapes (Morley 1980; Drotner 2000; Schrøder 1997; Couldry et al. 2007). But often such typological maps, which are only one form of qualitative generalization, are fraught with lurking suspicions that they do not constitute a reliable and transparent representation of the underlying social reality of audience practices. In contrast, I shall argue here that by combining qualitative and quantitative analysis and interpretation of the same data material it is possible to overcome interpretive opacity – always the Achilles’ heel of an exclusively qualitative procedure of data analysis.

The search for such an approach intended to square the methodological circle has been an underlying concern in my research on audiences for a number of decades. In the early days of reception research, under the banner of ‘cross-fertilization’, the challenge was formulated as consisting in ‘conceptualizing a method which makes it possible to incorporate and preserve qualitative data through a process of quantification, enabling the researcher to discern the (...) patterning of viewing responses’ (Schrøder 1987:27). Ten years later the same concern reappeared in a critical evaluation of the respective strengths and weaknesses of uses-and-gratifications research and audience ethnography, as a more methodologically focused suggestion that ‘it is by synthesizing these approaches into one research design that we may be able to develop a method to overcome the deficiencies and preserve the merits’, combining ‘the ‘thick description’ of the contextualized data of ethnographic inquiry with the reliability and generalizability of social science measurement’ (Schrøder 1999:38).

In the following I present an argument that it is possible, by mixing three separate empirical methods within and across the two main methodological paradigms, to produce an interpretive account of cross-media news consumption which in important respects retains the contextual situatedness of subjective audience experiences and practices, while also delivering a generalized typology of audience news repertoires with interpretive reliability and transparency. The account will proceed by offering, first, some reflections on the notion of generalization in the qualitative research community, and narrowing down the

specific variety of generalization applied in my study of news audiences. Secondly, the purposes, mechanics, and findings of the empirical study of cross-media news audiences will be described and related to the study's position on the issue of mixed methods as a vehicle of qualitative generalization. Finally, I shall address some of the ontological and epistemological issues that arise whenever methodological pluralism is operationalized in a specific empirical study, ending with a short presentation of the meta-theoretical platform of discursive realism which the news study is based on.

Qualitative generalization – an uncomfortable concept

The purposes of applying a mixed methods strategy can be many. In some audience research projects where the main effort consists in mapping audience practices through a questionnaire-based survey, researchers may facilitate the construction of their primary questionnaire instrument by scouting the empirical terrain with a (still important but secondary) small-scale qualitative pilot study (for instance, Jensen et al. 1994). In another kind of project audience researchers may want to supplement their survey findings about audiences' media repertoires with the equally important thick description provided by a handful of depth interviews with audience members (for instance, Hasebrink & Popp 2006).

As mentioned in the title of this article, my sole purpose in adopting a mixed methods design was to achieve a 'generalizing' capability for a qualitative study of cross-media news consumption. The same purpose – i.e. to 'generalize' findings – was invoked by the researchers who supplemented a qualitative study of the use of information technologies in households with a survey in order to arrive at a representative picture of a national population (Frissen & Punie 1998). But the term 'generalize' means entirely different things in these two studies.

The notion of generalization has been a sensitive one among qualitative audience researchers even without bringing methodological pluralism into the discussion. On the one hand there has been general agreement that in a qualitative set-up – due to the historical origin of reception research in an adversarial relationship to effects and uses-and-gratifications research – 'generalization' cannot mean that 'the questions asked by the qualitative research could be reformulated as hypotheses that could in turn be tested on random samples (...) using advanced statistical analysis' so that it would be possible to control, replicate and falsify the results (Eriksson 2006:33). But on the other hand some qualitative scholars have argued for an alternative variety of a 'generalizing imperative', based on the position that if as qualitative researchers we make no claims for the transferability of our findings beyond the narrow situational contexts studied, it becomes difficult to argue that qualitative research is socially relevant and worthy of funding. In this vein Drotner has argued for the obligation to generalize one's findings – the question 'is not whether or not we may generalize media-ethnographic findings but how we do so' (Drotner 2000:175).

However, there has been an influential grouping of radical constructionist audience researchers for whom any kind of ambition to produce general knowledge is, in principle, illegitimate, because the data coming out of qualitative interviews and observations are insolubly tied to the specific situations in which they occurred: '(...) emphasis on the situational embeddedness of audience practices and experiences inevitably undercuts the search for generalizations that is often seen as the ultimate goal of scientific knowledge' (Ang 1991:160; see also Ang & Hermes 1996:342). Even if this dogmatic position is no longer commonly found, the situationalist practice still flourishes, according to some observers of recent qualitative audience research:

The recent history of audience studies, at least in the British Cultural Studies tradition, has witnessed an abundance of largely 'anecdotal' qualitative case studies of discrete encounters between texts and audiences (...). This tendency makes it difficult to discern the relevance of ethnographic findings beyond the specific texts and contexts examined' (Davis & Michelle 2011: 560-561).

At the other extreme we find audience researchers who adhere to a strong version of a critical realist conception of generalization (see for instance Danermark et al. 2002). This is a position which requires that the findings of qualitative audience research do not just remain at the level of 'surface' analytical generalization – in the form of distilling empirical patterns from informant discourses, or constructing ideal types, as suggested by Halkier (2011) – but should dig one step deeper in order to infer the underlying generative mechanisms and 'transfactual conditions' in society which can be said to be a causal force behind the patterns found in the data (Eriksson 2006:38).

The Swedish audience researcher Birgitta Höijer can be seen as occupying a sane middle position in these debates, when she discusses the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of a mixed methods approach which may provide a generalizing capability for qualitative research: 'Usually one wants to draw conclusions valid for something much wider than the specific case, informants or situations empirically studied' (Höijer 2008:285). Höijer discusses a variety of possible ontological positions for a mixed methods approach to audience research across the quantitative-qualitative spectrum (which we cannot go into here), ending up with an eclectic, pragmatic ontologically mixed position which she describes as 'an ontology that simultaneously asserts social variation and cultural homogeneity or structuralism' (Höijer 2008:290-291). This is a kind of moderate constructionism, which attaches some underlying permanence to the informants' attributes and characteristics: they are the 'exponents of certain, but not singular or idiosyncratic, ideas, worldviews, knowledge, experiences and identities' (Höijer 2008:279). The informants thus 'represent' something in the sociocultural formation, for instance social groups, and if informants are recruited so as to ensure a diverse sociocultural anchorage, it becomes

possible and legitimate to generalize about them, i.e. to look for patterns and types, and to claim some generality for these patterns and types.

Analytical generalizations: some caveats

The Danish communication researcher Bente Halkier agrees that during the past ten years in qualitative circles the practice of generalization, in the form of 'analytical' generalization, has become 'a less apologetic affair' (Halkier 2011:787). As she demonstrates three different but complementary types of generalization applied to the same data material she nevertheless cites the common and still persisting objections to generalization, i.e. the particularity of qualitative findings and the alleged impossibility of generalizing in a way that does justice to the situated complexity of everyday practices and sense-making. Although she herself is strongly in favor of qualitative generalizations, she nevertheless argues for the saneness of these objections, in the sense that when embarking on analytical generalizations researchers should pay heed to some caveats deriving from the arguments of the situationalists. First, the patterns found should be seen as 'context bound typicalities' (Halkier 2011:788), and secondly when constructing the generalized patterns one should strive to incorporate within them 'dynamisms, ambivalences, conflicts, and complexities' (ibid.).

Building on practice theory which regards sociocultural practices as 'multi-relational configurations', Halkier also emphasizes that generalizations should incorporate the inherent multi-relationality of everyday phenomena (ibid. 789). This recommendation is one that can be observed in our news consumption study when applying the Q-methodological approach (see below), in which the central data-collection device takes the form of a multi-relational schematic grid on which informants puzzle their preferred and less preferred news media into co-relational position.

Finally among the reasons why qualitative generalization is surrounded by a certain uncomfortableness, we must list the widespread unease with the opaqueness of the interpretive processes which produce the generalizations. Bergman (1998) is particularly concerned with the way qualitative researchers usually characterize their interpretive coding and generalization of interview transcripts with non-specific labels like 'thematic analysis', 'discourse analysis', or 'grounded theory', but then do not demonstrate the procedures through which the generalizations were arrived at. She accuses reception researchers of having a magician's attitude to the reader, because their generalizations correspond to pulling a rabbit out of a hat, with the spectators being left to speculate on the invisible agility that performed the trick.

Along similar lines, Schrøder (2011) argues – using Couldry, Livingstone and Markham's (2007) study of mediated public connection as the example – that even when the analytical craftsmanship applied in order to set up a qualitative typology is impressive and accompanied by a real effort to initiate readers into the underlying interpretive procedures, we are still left with a fundamental opacity. Such opacity is often exacerbated

by the frequent urge in qualitative research, fueled by an apparent inferiority complex towards quantitative representativeness, to emulate the empirical performance of quantitative designs by amassing large numbers of informants. Thus Couldry et al. implement a research design whose qualitative toolbox encompasses 37 informants doing a month-long diary assignment, preceded and followed by hour-long qualitative interviews. The ensuing staggering multitude and complexity of qualitative data are subjected to a painstaking intersubjective coding process in the pursuit of patterns and types:

One way of seeing patterns was to isolate two diarists demonstrably similar in one way or another, and try to explain the detailed ways in which they varied, not in a definitive way, but simply to open up areas of analysis that otherwise might not have emerged. This close reading of the data generated a set of analytical terms which we then sought to apply more broadly, first by generating individual diagrams of diarists' social contexts and media use, and then by constructing overall diagrams and maps which sought to locate the diarists relative to each other' (Couldry et al. 2007, p. 54-55)

However, in spite of such craftsmanship and methodological candidness, when this kind of interpretive process from data to qualitative generalization is concluded by setting up a model of people's mediated public connection that distinguishes ten different types in the data, the question remains whether the degree of transparency achieved is satisfactory. Or in general terms whether the computational capacity of the human brain is sufficient to reliably find the real patterns in the qualitative data, arising from the infinite relational web of differences and similarities between the discursive positionings of the 37 informants?

The same question may be asked – in order to avoid the accusation of throwing stones while oneself living in a glasshouse – of qualitative generalizations inferred on the basis of much smaller data sets, for instance the 16-informant qualitative reception study of people's sense-making of corporate advertisements (Schrøder 1997). This study boldly categorizes the informants on the basis of three overlapping attitudes to the corporate ads: Sympathetic, Agnostic, and Cynical, and even dares to suggest that the patterns found among British and Danish informants may be related to underlying forces in the respective landscapes of class and politics in the two countries (Schrøder et al. 2003:116ff).

For the purposes of this article, the lesson following from the different kinds of evidence presented in this section concerning the desirability and feasibility of qualitative generalization is that qualitative researchers need a new tool which can compensate for the insufficient computational capacity of the scholar's brain – a tool which can offer a transparent and reliable means of finding the real patterns in qualitative data. Such a tool was tried and tested in our study of cross-media news consumption.

Generalizing about audiences' cross-media news repertoires: bridging the qualitative-quantitative divide

In the contemporary mediatized world where people live their lives not 'with' but 'in' media (Deuze 2011), they are every day faced with the challenge of navigating through the jungle of ubiquitous media, which they depend on as resources in important respects in order to live their lives as citizens, consumers, and just people. As audience researchers we are faced with the challenge of describing and understanding how people accomplish their mediatized lives by exposing themselves to a plethora of traditional and digital media; by making sense of their media experiences; and increasingly by participating in the mediated social and communicative networks.

I have argued elsewhere that in order to research the audiences' media lives it is necessary to see audiences as inherently cross-media: a genuine audience perspective on the contemporary media culture must adopt a cross-media lens, because people in everyday life, as individuals and groups, found their practices and form their identities through being the inevitable sense-making hubs of the spokes of the mediatized culture (Schrøder 2011:6). One particular challenge among many for audience research consists in identifying the patterns of cross-media consumption, also termed 'media repertoires' (Hasebrink & Popp 2006) or 'matrices of media' (Finnemann 2008). Couldry et al. (2007) argue that the practical composition of such habits of media consumption should be given priority in audience research, because 'the particular constellation of media on which one individual draws may be quite different than another's. It is at this level of habit – routine consumption practice embedded in a range of other routines, some social, some individual – that media come to make a difference, or not, as the case may be' (Couldry et al. 2007:190-191).

Researching audience constellations of news media

The primary aim of the project about cross-media news consumption presented here was to explore whether the individual 'constellations' of news media could be seen to form patterns when analysed qualitatively across a considerable number of individuals, and whether such patterns could be constructed in the form of an exhaustive typology with explanatory plausibility for the Danish news landscape. Metaphorically we wanted to explore what Danes take from the shelves of the news supermarket and put into their 'news shopping carts', and then to analyse the similarities and differences between the contents of the shopping carts, with a view to discerning a small number of configurations to which all individuals could be assigned.

Theoretically the project was positioned in the context of the current retheorizing of the public sphere, which argues that democratic practices are not confined to the formal political framework of a Habermasian public sphere (Habermas 1962; 2006), but should be seen in the wider context of civic agency as something people do in everyday culture, as they enact the microdynamics of democracy (Jones 2006; Dahlgren 2006). One aim of the project, therefore, was to see if people's news repertoires could be interpreted as enabling

resources for democratic citizenship. For further elaboration of this and other aspects of the study, see Schrøder & Kobbernagel (2010).

In order to ensure that the project was conceptually based on an unequivocal user's perspective, as opposed to a news publisher's or a marketer's perspective, users' motivations for taking 'their' news media from the supermarket of news were conceptualized as anchored in the notion of *perceived worthwhileness*. As citizen-consumers, in a manner of speaking, 'browse' the entire news universe at their disposal, we see their selections as being conditioned by a positive answer to the hypothetical question: Is this news medium worth my while?

Worthwhileness is a complex, multidimensional concept, a mindset which shapes the researcher's conceptualization of the object of study, not a checklist for audience members to respond to. It consists of at least seven interrelated properties of news media and formats that are, metaphorically, weighed in an internal dialogue within the user's mind about (1) the *availability of time* for a given news medium; (2) a given news medium's *situational affordances* and its 'fit' with current situational circumstances; (3) whether its *technological affordances* are perceived as desirable or not; (4) whether a news medium's content enables the individual's *sense of belonging* to social and cultural networks; (5) the mundane aspect of the news medium's *price*; (6) the presence or absence of *socio-normative constraints* among significant others on the use or non-use of the news medium; and (7) the availability of *participatory affordances* (as with online and social media). These necessarily brief descriptions are elaborated in Schrøder & Kobbernagel (2010).

We stress that the selection of news media for inclusion in an individual's news repertoire takes place through a 'metaphorical' process of weighing, because we wish to distance ourselves from the functionalist perspective of uses-and-gratifications research, which ascribes media use to a deliberate, rational process in which individuals match their socio-psychological 'needs' with specific 'gratifications' expected to emanate from the use of specific media (Elliott 1974). While media use is clearly at times decided by conscious choice, we believe that everyday media consumption practices are largely decided, as Couldry et al. phrased it above, by 'routine consumption practice embedded in a range of other routines, some social, some individual'.

The research design we set up in order to explore people's navigation in the news landscape, in the light of perceived worthwhileness as the driving force, was multimethod in a dual sense. In the first sense of being multimethod, we combined, traditionally and sequentially, a quantitative and a qualitative study of news consumption in a cross-media perspective, not in order for the quantitative study to 'generalize' the qualitative findings by rendering them representative, but in order to build partial and complementary pictures of the complex reality of cross-media news consumption. But naturally, the findings of the *quantitative* survey, taken in isolation, can *per se* be said to be generalized in the standard statistically representative way.

In the second sense of being multimethod, the separate *qualitative* study of cross-media news consumption combined, in an integrative manner which to some ears may sound contradictory, qualitative and quantitative techniques within one fieldwork process, in which the role of the quantitative component was to fortify a process of qualitative generalization.¹

In the following, the two separate but related studies are presented in the chronological sequence in which we did them.

The quantitative survey: Users' choices and preferences in the landscapes of news consumption

First we wanted to map from a high altitude, as it were, which of the available news media people find worthwhile in a number of different ways, without considering the constellations that they enter into in people's news media repertoires. This study was carried out as a systematic online survey of the Danish population (November 2008, N=1031), in which people's coherent everyday news routines were separated out into questions in a conventional questionnaire about use or non-use of the news media, in a factual and regimented way. The ultimate objective of this study was to be able to present a representative generalization about people's distribution in the news market based on numerical data.

One question asked respondents about the aggregate worthwhileness of 16 news media and news formats, translated into a question about which they had used during the past week. Although this question did not take time spent into account, the findings nevertheless provide a picture of the relative importance for audiences of the different news media: TV news 88%, news on the internet 78%, radio news 70%, text-TV news 60%, local weeklies 57% (the full results are reported in Schrøder & Larsen 2010). Among the surprises were the high prominence of the superficial text-TV news medium (60%) and the limited role of national dailies (49%), although an interpretation like 'surprise' can only be fully justified by following the trends in news consumption over time. We are currently replicating the survey in order to enable such a longitudinal perspective. The preliminary report (in Danish, see Schrøder & Kobbernagel 2012) shows, among other things, that the use of mobile/smart phones for getting news has exploded from a mere 7% in 2008 to 28% in 2011, while national dailies have plummeted to a readership of 32% on a weekly basis.

Another question asked respondents which news medium they found 'most worthwhile', translated into a questionnaire item about which they found 'most indispensable'. On this count the leading news media were TV news 37% (38%), news on the internet 20% (22%) and national dailies 15% (7%), with the corresponding figures for 2011 in parenthesis.

In order to explore the different functionalities in users' consumption of news media, we asked respondents which news media they prefer when they want an overview over what goes on in society, as opposed to when they want background and insight. The recent

ascendancy of online news as an important *overview* news medium asserts itself, as TV news (27%) and online news (28%) are running head to head, with text-TV running third (15%) and national dailies trailing far behind (5%). When it comes to the *background* function, however, national dailies reassert themselves as number one (28%) followed by TV news (24%), TV current affairs (14%) and online news (9%). The deepening crisis for print newspapers is documented by 2011 figures showing a decrease from 28% to 17% on the background function, i.e. what should have been the national dailies' home turf.

More generally, the findings about the overview/background dichotomy enabled us to generalize that two news media, TV news and online news, can be termed 'all-round news media', because they figure prominently in both functionalities of usage. All other news media, conversely, are 'mono-functional': For instance, radio news, text-TV and free newspapers mainly cater to people's need for overview news, while national dailies, TV current affairs and professional journals fulfil the need for background insight.

While these selected findings from the survey component of the mixed methods study stand in their own right (and were reported independently in Schrøder & Larsen 2010), they also serve a 'complementary' role in the overall research project design, showing how the seven typological repertoires of news media preferences (constructed in the qualitative study below) materialize in the market landscape of news providers in Denmark. The survey findings thus show the consequences of the typology for audiences' news consumption levels, functionalities and preferences; they show the power balance in terms of audience support for the different news media, with consequences for competition in the news market. When the longitudinal dimension is added by conducting similar surveys at regular intervals, 'such tracking of changes in the population's news preferences will be an iterative monitoring of whether the news company's ventures in the different areas of the news market are responding to people's behaviour in terms of actual news demand' (Schrøder & Larsen 2010:532).

The fortified qualitative mapping: typological formations in cross-media news consumption

The second objective of the project was to explore qualitatively the ways in which a non-representative, but 'typical' sample of people, motivated by perceived worthwhileness, make sense of the different *news media in relation to each other*; how they tell their story of everyday life with the news media in their own words; and how they arrange and justify the available news media in a personal sequence of experienced importance. The ultimate objective of this second, independent study was to be able to present an analytical generalization in the form of a typology of news media repertoires based on qualitative data, i.e. the informants' discourses about their life with the news media. This second study is the primary one in the context of this article, whose main concern is to propose an innovative approach to generalization in qualitative research.

The fieldwork was strongly anchored in the qualitative tradition as it took the form of an approximately one-hour dialogical interview between a researcher and individual informants at a neutral local venue such as the back room of a café (N=35, purposively sampled to represent gender, different age groups, and different educational levels; refreshments were served). The informants were thus ‘typical’ in the sense proposed by Höijer above, as they were recruited as the ‘exponents of certain, but not singular or idiosyncratic ideas, worldviews, experiences and identities’ (Höijer 2008:279). The first act (15-20 minutes) consisted of a loosely structured dialogue in which the informant was invited to tell the story of ‘a day in the life’ with the media (typically ‘yesterday’), from getting up in the morning until getting to bed at night. We asked informants to describe all encounters with media, especially news media, in the everyday situational context, at home, during transport, at work, during leisure, etc. and tried through gentle elicitation and probing to get as detailed a picture as possible of the informant’s encounters with and uses of news media: What news media were used, with whom, for what purpose, with what outcome, etc.?

The second act (25-30 minutes) – unlike the almost archetypal ‘semi-structured’ interviews of reception research – was a more ‘structured interview’, in which specific questions were asked, although not in a fixed order. The format of this part of the interview complied in a basic sense with the recipe for doing a Q-methodological study. Here I shall describe the particular way in which the method was tailored in the cross-media news consumption study (for a general account of the method, see McKeown & Thomas 1988; Brown 1993; Rogers 1995; Schrøder et al. 2003:360ff; Davis & Michelle 2011).

Q-methodology is a social scientific method that measures individuals’ subjective perceptions of an area of experience and then brings these perceptions together by calculating, through factor analysis, a typological pattern of differences and similarities between the informants’ perceptions as recorded through a card-sorting task.

Because it allows insight into audience subjectivities in a much richer and more holistic way than conventional surveys, while providing clearer structure, better replicability and a more rigorous analytical framework than purely qualitative approaches (...), Q-methodology is particularly well suited for the study of media reception and use. (Davis & Michelle 2011:561)

As a result of its qualitative/quantitative hybridity, Q-methodology tends to be perceived as a quantitative methodology by qualitative researchers, ‘but like a qualitative methodology by quantitative researchers’ (Davis & Michelle 2011:563).

The recipe of Q-methodology prescribes that informants must place a number of cards on a cardboard grid on the table in front of them (although online versions of the method have now been developed). On each card is written a statement about one aspect of the particular sociocultural phenomenon being investigated, so that the cards in their

totality provide an aggregate and complete picture of a given discursive field. Informants are asked to place each card on the grid's continuum from 'most agree' to 'least agree', i.e. where they find that it truthfully represents their evaluation or attitude to the content of the statement. For an example of the grid used in this study, see **Figure 1**.

Figure 1: Q grid of one informant

| | | | | | | | | |
|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|
| | | | | 4 | | | | |
| | | | 25 | 16 | 21 | | | |
| | | 20 | 13 | 15 | 1 | 22 | | |
| | 19 | 17 | 9 | 14 | 12 | 6 | 24 | |
| 23 | 10 | 8 | 2 | 3 | 11 | 5 | 7 | 18 |

Does not play
a role in my life

Plays a role in
my life

*[Numbers refer to the 25 elicitation cards which informants sorted on the grid (see **Appendix 1**)]*

Because our study wanted to analyse the informants' subjective perception of the experienced worthwhileness of the cross-media news landscape, we ensured that all relevant news media in Denmark were represented on the 25 cards (see the list of news media in **Appendix 1**). The interviewer handed the cards to the informant one at a time in random order, and asked the informant to read it aloud and then to reflect on where to place the news medium/card on the grid's continuum from 'Plays a role in my life' to 'Does not play a role in my life'. The cards thus served as a structured, random dialogical interview guide to get the informant to think and talk about the role played by each of the 25 news media in his/her everyday life. The strongly conversational format of our Q study is different from the standard 'Q sorts' design, in which respondents are given the stack of cards to sort in silence.

In methodological terms, the study combined the conventional *qualitative interview* with an equally conventional *qualitative think-aloud procedure*, enabling us to follow the discursive process through which the informant negotiated his/her contextual and situational use of the particular news medium, as a prerequisite of being able to position each card as truthfully as possible in relation to the other cards on the grid's continuum. When informants have completed the card placing process, accompanied by dialogical negotiation, they have self-analyzed their subjective news consumption universe, whose internal architecture is moreover relational, and thus follows Halkier's recommendation (above) that qualitative generalizations should incorporate the inherent multi-relationality of everyday phenomena.

While this should be seen as a validity gain inherent in the method, it is also accompanied by a validity cost: while most informants engage playfully in the card-placing exercise, taking up the challenge to make it all fit at the end, a few informants experience the card-placing as the imposition of a strait-jacket that forces them, due to the different number of slots in the different columns in the grid, to not do full justice to the interrelations of the different news media in their lives. When they nevertheless complete the card placements they experience this as a pragmatic concession.

In the next stage, because the cards are numbered, the configurations produced by the 35 informants lend themselves to a computerized factor analysis, which results in a reliable calculation of the way in which the differences and similarities in the diverse configurations form typological patterns. Through the card configurations on the grid the method thus possesses a built-in pattern-finding generalization capability, which can help the qualitative analyst fortify the construction of a qualitative typology, which could also have been produced – but much less reliably – by human analytical generalization.

However, in all honesty it should be said that the typology produced by the factor analysis is neither objective nor infallible, as it incorporates a human interpretive component. A factor analysis comes up with a number of different ‘models’ which all represent patterns found in the data, but in different ways, and it is up to the researcher to apply his interpretive skills, choosing between them in order to pick the model which can be argued to best explain the data in both statistical and theoretical terms. Thus as explained in Schrøder & Kobbernagel (2010) our factor analysis produced models with four, five, six and seven factors/types, and it required a scrupulous interpretive procedure to decide that the seven-factor model was superior to the others:

The evaluation and choice of model relied on statistical criteria as well as the meaningfulness of the structure of each factor. The process resulted in the choice of a model with seven factors, which explained 79 per cent of the variance and had 25 participants loading significantly on the factors. The model of seven factors was arrived at by PCA and varimax rotation. This model overruled the models with four, five, and six factors. (...) Since we are essentially using factor analysis as a generalization device, we decided that it was analytically meaningful to include six additional participants, whose amounts of variance shared with the factors in their respective Q-sorts are very close to the level of significance (...). The remaining four participants cannot be placed meaningfully within any of the seven groups, because they are correlating highly with more than three factors. (Schrøder & Kobbernagel 2010:125-126)

However, in the context of our argument about qualitative generalization, what constitutes the decisive improvement of the factor analytical typology is its high level of reliability and transparency, when compared with a typology produced by human brain-work alone.

Figure 2: Typology of cross-media news users (Top-Five rankings from 25 news media) June-September 2009.

| | |
|---|--|
| <p>1. The traditional, versatile news user 9 informants</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mainstream TV news - National newspapers - Radio news morning - TV current affairs serious - Internet news sites | <p>5. The heavy newspaper reader 3 informants</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - National newspapers - Mainstream TV news - Text TV news - Internet news sites - Specialized newspapers |
| <p>2. The 'popular' digital news user 4 informants</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Social net media - Internet news sites - Mainstream TV news - TV current affairs light - Free dailies | <p>6. The news update addict 4 informants</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 24-hour TV news - Mainstream TV news - Text TV news - Internet news sites - Social net media |
| <p>3. The depth digital news user 3 informants</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Internet news sites - Social net media - Mainstream TV news - Internet cultural sites - Free dailies | <p>7. The regional omnivore 3 informants</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mainstream TV news - Regional dailies - TV current affairs serious - Family weekly magazines - Internet news sites |
| <p>4. The light newspaper reader 4 informants</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mainstream TV news - Tabloid newspapers - Free newspapers - Internet news sites - TV current affairs light | |

Findings: the interplay of quantitative and qualitative findings

In this article the purpose is to discuss the principles of qualitative generalization, not the details of the specific typology of cross-media news consumption we ended up with. We shall therefore restrict ourselves to a fairly brief presentation of the analytical findings, and as before refer the interested reader to a more detailed analytical account elsewhere (Schrøder & Kobbarnagel 2010). **Figure 2** (above) shows what our typology of seven groups of news consumers looks like, with the headline labels which inevitably move the generalizations further in the direction of cultural interpretation rather than objective fact.

The news consumption profiles of the seven types probably strike most readers as fairly plausible groupings in a European society, although in other European countries presumably the precise configurations would take a different shape as a result of alternative historical trajectories, media institutional systems, and sociocultural circumstances generally. One striking feature of the Danish typology is that while the profiles are defined in some cases by traditional print media and in other cases by digital news sources or by round-the-clock TV news, all seven groups have both (public service) TV news and Internet news sites in their top-five list. Thus despite clearly differentiated news taste-patterns, the Danish population as represented by the 31 informants is characterized by a certain homogeneity in their preferential packages of news media.

From the seven statistically derived news media repertoires it is possible to move on, as Couldry et al. (2007) do on the basis of their purely qualitative ten-group typology, towards wider cultural and political horizons, for instance relating the groups to the news media's role as democratic resources for citizens. Here one could look for answers to the question whether the Danes' constellations of media seem to qualify them as well-informed, competent citizens. This requires us to not just look at the typological evidence, but to go back to the discursive evidence which accompanied the card placing exercise, in the form of transcripts of the qualitative conversations. For an example of this, see **Figure 3** (below).

When we look at the discursive evidence in order to regain some of the thick description that was lost in the factor-analytical reductions, we can do so with the conviction that there is a direct link between the statistically produced types and the 31 informants: because they spring from the same data set, each informant belongs to a type in a transparent sense, so that the typological patterns (i.e. the quantitative findings) and the sense-making of individual informants (i.e. the qualitative findings) are indeed two sides of a coin, unlike what is often the case with the sequentially mixed methods where the findings of the qualitative and the quantitative methods are really two different coins, or perhaps two different currencies. This does not mean of course, (to remain with the metaphor) that there can be no exchange between these currencies, only that one needs to know the exact exchange rate in order to get value for money. 'Complementarity' would seem to be one strategy for exchanging such findings.

Figure 3: Profile of type no.4: The light newspaper reader.

Interpretation of the factor-analytical data

While these participants like everyone else look to primetime TV news and net news for substantial parts of their news diet, they are clearly distinguished by their allegiance to tabloid newspapers and free newspapers. They seek a mixture of entertaining and serious current affairs programs, and are not averse to international news sources. The overview function is served by net news and text-TV. Social net media are used moderately, as are morning and daytime radio, and weekly magazines. Of low importance are professional magazines, international non-media news sites, and national niche newspapers. In our sample these people tend to be male, without college and live in the greater Copenhagen area.

Interpretation of the qualitative interview discourses

The free and/or sensational newspapers do not just serve as a commuter's time-killer, but are highly appreciated and given deliberate priority as sources of news. The tabloid newspapers are preferred over the free papers due to their use of prominent photos: "The free papers lack the pictures which *Ekstra Bladet* and *BT* have, which contributes to the sensationalism of these two" (Informant 33: p. 4). Another reason lies in the tabloids' verbal ingenuity, their creative puns: "If you are looking for wordplay, then look at *Ekstra Bladet* and *BT*! (...) When they have a funny headline, that makes you think "Okay, what's going on here?" (Informant 4: p.3). The serious national newspapers and the niche newspapers are regarded with suspicion (ranked no. 20 and 25): "No, I never touch any of those, they're not my segment, they are not my interest, they're more for people with good careers (...)" (Informant 25: p.10). For background, they look to light as well as serious TV current affairs programmes, especially the former because, like the tabloids, they offer drama, human interest and disclosure. These attractions are coupled with a populist indignation towards misbehaving politicians, but the indignation does not lead to involvement and political action: "Well, I'm not politically active, I can get mad at politicians, but it's not something I'm going to fight for, or become politically active" (Informant 4: p.3). They are fed up with the excessive politically correct media coverage of the climate and the environment. Their horizon of relevance is located close to home.

News value keywords: Preference for sensational, human interest news with a populist angle; appreciate verbal ingenuity of headlines; distaste of political correctness (climate, environment).

If one wants to pursue the cross-cultural challenge mentioned briefly above, the kind of fortified qualitative generalizations produced by Q-methodology hold great potential for comparative research, as they overcome the barriers often encountered in transnational research projects where the qualitative findings are, as they should be, heavily contextualized and therefore impossible to compare in standardized ways. The suitability of the customized Q-methodological approach for comparative research resides in the fact that news consumption in each country can be analyzed in its own, contextualized terms, but still through the standardized research vehicle of the card placement on the relational grid:

It is precisely the configurability of the card placements according to the individual subjectivities of the participants that guarantees cultural specificity and context-dependent data. (...) the data can be translated into a standardized form, which makes it possible to perform common, standardized statistical procedures and to produce generalizations in the form of typologies that are transparent and immediately comparable (Schrøder 2011:22)

Summing up, in the above account of the strengths of the Q-methodological approach we have noted a couple of imperfections along the way. All this goes to show is that – not unexpectedly – this particular method cannot be seen as a panacea to solve all the problems that beset qualitative audience research. In addition to the imperfections, which one has to live with when applying the Q-methodological design, it should be added that – again not unexpectedly – there are many questions in qualitative audience research which do not lend themselves to the application of this methodological tool. This is the case, for instance, with the analysis of comprehension processes (Mathieu 2009) and other phenomena that do not translate easily to the continuum requirements of the Q grid. However, as the impressive list of nearly a hundred audience studies using Q-methodology compiled by Davis & Michelle (2011) demonstrates, there are many research questions that do fall within the scope of this methodology.

Thus as exemplified in the study of cross-media news consumption, a customized application of Q-methodology like ours, which amplifies its qualitative potential, can be said to offer the best of both worlds, in the sense of working with qualitative data that are contextualized in the informant's life-world, and which are self-analyzed relationally into a standardized form amenable to factor-analytical calculation, resulting in transparent typological generalizations which hold potential for comparative research.

The quest for epistemological underpinnings of methodological pluralism

Many have questioned the ontological and epistemological legitimacy of mixing methods that originate in very different philosophies of science. One authoritative voice in these debates observes without necessarily approving such a pragmatic view that 'there is a

growing preparedness to think of research methods as techniques of data collection or analysis that are not as encumbered by epistemological and ontological baggage as is sometimes supposed' (Bryman 2001:454).

While this may also aptly characterize a widespread mindset in the community of audience researchers, this kind of carefree following of the Nike wisdom of 'Just do it!' may jeopardize the explanatory ambitions of mixed methods audience research, because epistemological superficiality leads to a lack of awareness of what it really means to bring together forms of knowledge harvested with so different epistemological lenses.

Reception research as cross-fertilization

In the area of audience research there is a long tradition of cross-fertilizing methods going back to the pioneering days of qualitative reception research in the early 1980s. However, the process through which reception research emerged as an alternative paradigm in audience studies was not concerned with the mixing of methods in the sense used nowadays to do with the sequential application of different methods. Rather cross-fertilization had to do with developing a firmly defined *qualitative* kind of audience research at the crossroads of social science and humanities paradigms (Schrøder 1987; Jensen & Rosengren 1990; Jensen 1991). Reception researchers saw themselves as engineering a new species of research by combining selected methodological genes from existing qualitative and quantitative species – the genes of 'sense-making' and 'meaning' from humanities-based textual analysis, and the gene of fieldwork engagement with informants from social science behavioral research. In the words of one pioneer, reception research 'draws its theory from the humanities and its methodology from the social sciences' (Jensen 1991: 135).

In audience reception research the mixing of methods in the sequential sense only started its cautious ascendancy once the new approach had established itself solidly enough in the audience research community to dare to discuss the possible sacrifice of the sacred cows of paradigm conflict (Livingstone & Lunt 1994; Jensen et al. 1994; Lewis 1997).² The theorization of mixing as 'triangulation' and 'complementarity' gained ground among reception researchers around the year 2000 (Schrøder 1999; Jensen 2002), paralleling developments across the social sciences in general at the same time (Greene 2007:32). However, newcomers to audience research should remember that methodological pluralism, now so obvious to many, was arrived at through sometimes fierce battles between dogmatic defenders of the epistemological incongruity of qualitative and quantitative methods. Greene describes how, in 'the great qualitative-quantitative debate' of the 1970s and 1980s, 'the assumptions and stances of interpretivism, constructivism, phenomenology, and other paradigms favoring qualitative methodologies appeared radical, even ludicrous to other social scientists' (Greene 2007:37; for an example from audience research, see Rosengren 1996).

A similar kind of epistemological and methodological dogmatism could then be heard from the qualitative camp, where it has lived on until the present day among the paradigm's die-hards. Thus to one of the nestors of qualitative research, Norman Denzin, who fathered the notion of 'triangulation' (Denzin 1970), the very idea of 'mixed methods' is anathema, as he equates qualitative research with a politically committed kind of critical inquiry, which he sees as being 'under attack from many different sides: from the evidence- and science-based research movements on the one hand, to postpositivists, *mixed methods*, and traditional qualitative researchers on the other side' (Denzin 2010:10f, quoted in Hammersley 2012:360, emphasis added, KS).

However, as the strength of the isolationist credos has subsided, it has become almost common sense that 'each method reveals different aspects of empirical reality' (Blaikie 1991:116). Noting that in the broad field of social science inquiry 'combining quantitative and qualitative research has become unexceptional and unremarkable in recent years', Bryman (2006:97) also observes how the use of mixed method designs is often accompanied by a tacit obviousness and a spirit of unreflective buzz. Bryman examined 232 journal articles in five academic fields 1994-2003, finding that the use of mixed methods was less common in media and cultural studies than in four other disciplines.

In the practice of mixing methods across the social sciences, Bryman finds that the most common way to mix is to combine a questionnaire-based survey with qualitative interviews (Bryman 2006:103). Analyzing the justifications researchers use for their multimethod designs, Bryman discovers that more than half the studies were motivated by 'complementarity' and 'expansion' of insights, while significantly—and as an apparent outcome of the 'Nike philosophy' of just doing it—no justification at all was given in a quarter of the cases. Moreover there is frequently a 'mismatch between the rationale offered for the combined use of quantitative and qualitative research and how it is used in practice', bearing witness to 'a tendency for the rationales for using multi-strategy research not to be thought through sufficiently' (Bryman 2006:110).

Taking mixed methods seriously: meta-theoretical reflections

How *can* we then sufficiently think through the rationales for using mixed methods? Inspired by the extensive review and discussion of mixed methods research in Greene (2007)³, I shall argue that for the sequential as well as for the integrative varieties of mixing, it is possible to distinguish between two different meta-theoretical perspectives: the '*different kinds of knowledge*' perspective and the '*common knowledge claim*' perspective.

The former perspective has it that in mixing methods one brings together essentially different kinds of knowledge, and therefore two methods used together produce more and better knowledge than one, i.e. more of the 'whole' of the phenomenon being studied. Here the justification for combining methods rests on tolerance and respect for the epistemological Other and the peaceful coexistence and dialogue between rival

epistemologies. Höijer's plea for eclectically 'mixed ontologies' can be seen as one variant of this position (Höijer 2008).

The latter perspective claims that we need a common epistemological framework in which the compatibility and complementarity of quantitative and qualitative methods are anchored in a common knowledge claim for the two paradigms, which – as is also the case with the other perspective – does not privilege one form of knowledge over the other as inherently superior and more scientific (Schrøder et al. 2003:44). This position is often derived from the meta-theoretical perspective of 'critical realism' (Bhaskar 1978; Deacon, Pickering, Golding and Murdock 1999; Danermark et al. 2002; Jensen 2012). Danermark et al. argue that language and interpretation are necessary vehicles of all forms of knowledge: 'science can never limit itself merely to observing, registering and reporting (...) Reasoning, our ability to analyse, abstract, relate, interpret and draw conclusions, is a fundamental precondition for all knowledge and knowledge development (Danermark et al. 2002:79).

Inspired by Giddens' theory of structuration (Giddens 1984), Stig Hjarvard (1997) has argued along similar lines that 'neither theoretically nor epistemologically is there any difference between quantitative and qualitative methods'; while no one would contest that qualitative methods rely on language and interpretation Hjarvard specifically argues that this is also the case with quantitative methods: 'What we usually call quantitative methods is just one subgroup of methodological approaches for the analysis of empirical phenomena, which, like all other methods, applies interpretation and qualitative procedures' (Hjarvard 1997:62).

To Hjarvard, the natural division of labor between the two methodologies simply consists in quantitative methods being suitable for exploring issues that belong to Giddens' realm of 'structure', i.e. the mapping of the relatively permanent frameworks and patterns in the social formation, or the characteristics of a population that are independent of individual acts in specific situations; qualitative methods, conversely, lend themselves to the analysis of 'agency', i.e. the processes and practices that are situationally specific and have to do with the meaningfulness of interactional and discursive processes between people in concrete situations.

The Q-methodological study of news consumption leans on both these epistemological perspectives, but in different ways: The 'common knowledge claim' perspective, in the particular form of discursive realism outlined below, appears to be the most consistent meta-theoretical foundation on which to implement methodological pluralism. The 'different knowledges' perspective seems, ostrich-like, to evade the fundamental epistemological challenge of how to combine knowledge produced with different methods, but nevertheless offers some useful practical procedures for the cross-fertilization of such knowledges.

Mixing methods under the 'different knowledges' perspective

The different knowledges perspective is the one propounded by Jennifer Greene (2007). She accepts that attempts to establish an alternative, bridging epistemological position (such as

critical realism) are legitimate, but argues that such attempts tend to ‘paper over potentially important differences or to homogenize mixed methods thought along just one channel’ (Greene 2007:16). To Greene, mixed methods research is a dialogue between what you see through different lenses, not differentiated perspectives deriving from one epistemological lens.

Greene argues that the different methods have ‘different and distinctive but not inherently incompatible attributes’, but appears to evade the question of on what epistemological grounds the methods can be ‘compatibilized’. Hence the suggestion above that her position appears ostrich-like. She wishes to ‘leave to the philosophers the challenge of incompatibility’ (ibid. 53), instead of possibly following those philosophers who have attempted to carve out the ‘third way’ of critical realism (Pavitt 1999).

Among the six possible stances to methodological pluralism, which she describes, she opts for the stance termed ‘dialectical’, in which ‘important paradigm differences should be respectfully and intentionally used together to engage meaningfully with difference, and, through the tensions created by juxtaposing different paradigms, to achieve dialectical discovery of enhanced, reframed, or new understandings’ (Greene 2007:69). While the practical analytical consequences may not be great, it is strange that this choice of perspective springs from an ethical and political commitment rather than from a rigorous meta-theoretical argument. As she candidly tells her pilgrim’s progress testimony of how she ended up in the mixed methods congregation, it becomes clear that ‘I came to believe that with a mixed methods approach I could position my work in service of values I cherish – values of tolerance, understanding and acceptance. (...) in the service of the public good, advancing values consonant with a strong democracy’ (ibid. 65, 80).

When it comes to conceptualizing the practical procedures of applying a mixed method design, however, Greene’s frameworks are both systematic and rigorous, as she describes how data from different methods can be brought to interact with each other in the service of higher-level insights. Usefully she emphasizes that ‘the mixing part of mixed methods social inquiry will always (...) resist inflexible prescriptions. (...) the mixed methods field remains ripe for further conceptual work on the challenges of analyzing, in well-planned and meaningful ways, multiple data sets of different form, content, and character’ (ibid.143).

Greene usefully distinguishes between two kinds of mixed method designs:

- ‘component’ design, in which the data produced with each different method are handled independently of each other, and ‘the mixing or linking or connecting happens at the (...) stage of interpretation and inferencing’ (ibid.144).
- ‘integrated’ design, where the data produced with one method may affect the data produced with another, and is characterized by ‘the intentional

interaction among different sets of data during the study, especially during the analysis stage' (ibid.144).

While the former type typically characterizes the sequential variety of mixed methods, Greene's inventory of data analysis strategies aims to handle the latter, 'integrated' designs, for which – after the universal analytical stages of Data-cleaning and Data-reduction – she posits three phases of data analysis:

- Data transformation and consolidation. Here one form of data (quantitative or qualitative) is transformed into another, so that the data can be subjected to different kinds of analysis, or in some cases be analyzed together (ibid.146).
- Data correlation and comparison. Here the analytical product of one form of data (quantitative or qualitative), such as a typology, or cluster of themes, can be brought in to structure another form of data, which may thereby invite new forms of analytical interpretation: '(...) classificatory results of varying types from an analysis of one type of data could be imported into an analysis of a different type of data and used to group the data and then assess patterns of commonality and differences among the various groups' (ibid.148).
- Analyses for inquiry conclusions and inferences. Here in the final stage of analysis 'higher-order analyses are conducted in support of conclusions or inferences' (ibid.145).

The first two phases of this general taxonomy of mixed method data analysis can be used to set up an explanatory framework for understanding the 'mixed' nature of the Q-methodological study. With respect to *Data transformation*, in the Q study the transformation processes are carried out by the informants themselves, through the data translation mechanism of placing the news media cards on the Q grid. What the Q informants do with the grid corresponds precisely to Greene's 'matrix transformation': '(...) qualitative data can be arrayed in matrix form (...) and then coded in this matrix form for exportation to a statistical or mathematical database for further analysis using techniques such as cluster and correspondence analysis' (149).

Secondly, in the Q study *Data correlation* occurs when the typology produced by the factor analysis is brought back to the transcripts of the qualitative interview-plus-think-aloud data in order to analyze each informant's news consumption discourse specifically in light of his or her computed membership of one of the seven news user types. This is an entirely different interpretive process than the one the researcher would have done on the basis of a purely qualitative study in which each informant would merely be conceptualized as one among thirty-five 'free-floating' informants. In contrast, working within the Q framework the analyst uses 'the factors yielded from a factor analysis of data from a

quantitative instrument to sort qualitative interview or observation data and then investigate patterns of commonality and difference among the different factor-groups of qualitative data' (ibid.148).

Mixing methods under the 'common knowledge claim' perspective

Like the different knowledges perspective, the *raison d'être* of the common knowledge perspective is to achieve a complementarity of perspectives on observed reality. But as signaled by the plural form of the former and the singular form of the latter, one leaves the issue of epistemological compatibility unresolved, while the other attempts to develop the third way of a unified epistemological orientation: critical realism presents itself as 'a third framework accommodating multiple types of evidence and inference, interpretation and explanation' (Jensen 2012:297), defined by ontological realism, epistemological relativism, and judgmental rationality (ibid. 298).

Jensen argues that critical realism comes with not just the desirability, but the necessity of methodological pluralism. This is because the epistemological dimension of relativism means that a one-method study of audiences, for instance, is only capable of delivering one 'version', or aspect, or insight, of the phenomenon we seek to understand. It follows logically that by applying more than one methodological lens we achieve a better insight, because the additional investigations produce additional versions of the phenomenon in question. This can be formulated as a mixed methods imperative, since it is 'the business of individual scholars and scientific communities (...) to compare and contrast alternative accounts of reality with reference to as wide a range of means of representing, interpreting, and intervening into it as theoretically and practically possible' (Jensen 2012:298).

While adhering to the key tenets of critical realism as a third way between objectivism and positivism on the one hand and constructionism and interpretivism on the other, Schrøder et al. (2003) emphasize the decisive role of language and discourse in human knowledge acquisition by terming their epistemological foundation 'discursive realism'. But irrespective of its specific terminological garb, this approach must be deemed superior especially as the epistemological foundation of the method-synthesizing lens of the Q study because this study does not simply juxtapose complementary forms of qualitative and quantitative knowledge, but fuses them into one methodological design.

The tailor-made version of Q-methodology applied in the news consumption study owes its equilibrium blend of qualitative and quantitative dimensions to inspiration from the common knowledge perspective. In the classic Q-methodological research format the qualitative think-aloud element during the card-sorting is usually absent or minimal, as informants place the cards on the quantifiable grid in silence. To let the card sorting unfold as an essentially dialogical process that produces a computable configuration on the grid was an idea spawned by an epistemological mindset for whom the qualitative and the quantitative, while different, are compatible and integratable. The discursive realist platform

thus ‘brings quantitative and qualitative methodologies into epistemological alignment as research methods with the same claims to knowledge and explanatory power’ (Schrøder et al. 2003:45).

The ‘third way’ postulate is founded on the circumstance that discursive realism stands on an ontological and epistemological platform that agrees with neither of the two paradigms, but is founded on giving concessions to both, for instance with respect to the objectivism/relativism dichotomy. A discursive realist agrees with interpretivism that ‘the findings – quantitative or qualitative – represent no more than ‘versions’ of reality’, but also with empiricism that some form of generalization is desirable and that ‘some versions of reality are better – *more* “truthful” – than others (Schrøder et al. 2003:45):

Though we can only know it through our concepts, there is nevertheless a *real* subject for our inquiry, which is not entirely spirited away by our admission of its relativized position (Willis 1980:10)

Thus some research findings can be argued to be more ‘truthlike’ (Danermark et al. 2002:10) than others – an issue to be arbitrated by negotiation in the community of scholars, according to the theoretical soundness of the investigation and the methodological craftsmanship of the researcher.

It is the claim of this article that the truthlikeness of the generalizations constructed with the integrated mixed method of the Q study is better than that of a corresponding study which infers its generalizations through a purely qualitative analysis of the data. By offering an innovative way to integrate quantitative and qualitative methods at the epistemological as well as the methodological level, this analysis of cross-media news consumption achieves a synthesis of quantitative and qualitative methods which lends a new meaning to the expression ‘to get the best of both worlds’.

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Appendix 1: The news media universe of the Q study

1. Prime time Danish TV news
2. 24-hour TV news
3. 'Serious' current affairs programs on Danish TV
4. 'Entertaining' current affairs programs on Danish TV
5. News and current affairs on interational TV channels
6. Radio news (mornings before 9 am)
7. Radio news (after 9 am)
8. Radio current affairs
9. National mainstream newspapers
10. National specialized newspapers
11. Free daily newspapers
12. Tabloid newspapers
13. Local/regional dailies

14. Local free weeklies
15. Professional magazines
16. Family and women's magazines
17. Magazines about lifestyle, health, culture
18. News on Danish newspapers' and TV-channels' websites
19. News on other Danish websites
20. Blogs with news on the internet
21. Social net media (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc.)
22. News on international news media websites
23. International news sites not produced by media
24. Text-TV news
25. News on mobile phones and other handheld media

Notes:

¹ The term 'fortify' is borrowed from David & Michelle (2011)

² Historical accuracy here requires the mentioning of early audience researchers like Hadley Cantril and Herta Herzog, who used mixed research designs in the 1940s (Cantril 1940; Herzog 1944).

³ Jennifer Greene builds her mixed-methods framework on the basis of her wide experience as a researcher in the area of educational psychology, where her special expertise originates in the evaluation of educational practices, youth development, and community-based family services, often with direct policy implications.