

Review

Geoffroy Patriarche, Helena Bilandzic, Jakob Linnaa Jensen and Jelena Jurišić (eds.), *Audience Research Methodologies: Between Innovation and Consolidation*, London: Routledge, 2014. ISBN: 978-0-415-83435-3 pbk. 256pp.

This book is one of a number to emerge from the hugely productive European COST-Action project, to explore the transformations that media audiences are currently undergoing, as a result of digitisation and convergence. (Among the other most recent are Nico Carpentier et al. (eds.), *Audience Transformations: Shifting Audience Positions in Late Modernity* [separated reviewed here], and Klaus Bredl et al. (eds.), *Methods for Analysing Social Media*.) I want to focus on this one alone, as it has particular virtues, but also raises some significant issues.

In many books about research methodologies, there is a very traditional trooping through a set of standardised techniques: quantitative and/or versus qualitative; surveys, sampling, statistical methods, and so on; interviews and their principles, focus groups and their differences, etc; and – depending on the date, reach and background of the book – some touching on reception, archival and document research, and even non-traditional methods. These books can be valuable – I have gone to them myself on quite a few occasions – but they have a certain tyrannical flatness. They tend to duck round questions of conceptualisation, of historical context, of histories of use. One of the reasons I particularly appreciated this book was because, with just occasional exceptions, it does not treat methodology mechanically. Instead, it takes as its starting point certain tricky questions: what does it mean to think and talk of ‘audiences’ now; how are we as academics caught up in the changing dynamics of being audiences; and how do these shifts shape how we can and should pose questions to and about audiences?

In fact one very striking thing is the sheer range of methods and methodological issues it covers. In fact one really striking feature is the tiny amount of crossover in the literature the different essays call up, as sustenance. Here you will find concrete considerations of the uses in contemporary contexts of all the following: diary methods; participatory methods; online interactive methods; virtual shadowing methods; word-cloud analytic methods; creative methods; use of specific new resources like Twitter streams and blogposts; and triangulation of time-activity diary, personal questionnaire, and internet traffic data (among others). I have to note one tendency which I have seen elsewhere. There is greater attention to methods of *generating* materials and data than to methods of

analysis, in relation to qualitative materials. At times it seems that coding systems, or modes of thematic or discursive analysis, are taken as self-evidently effective. And to that I could add that it was a bit frustrating at times not to learn very much about what particular researches *discovered*. That surely in the end is one of our reasons for having faith in particular methods of methodologies – they are *productive*.

Rather than trying to cover all essays equally, I want to focus in one essay – not because it is problematic, the opposite in fact. I found Christine Wijnen and Sascha Trültzsch's essay a particularly valuable contribution, and its reflections on its methods ideal for use in teaching. The authors report on two German/Austrian projects which used participatory methods to gather from young people, first, their responses to the TV programme *Austria's Next Top Model*. Grounding their approach in the ideas of Kurt Lewin (1940), they outline the ways they enabled young people to take part in the design and conduct of the projects: refining the research questions, choosing the sample of young people whom they would research, conducting (after training) focus groups with their peers, and helping create coding systems for analysis. In the second study, which explored young people's understandings of 'privacy' in relation to social networking sites (SNS), the participants helped in choosing the dimensions for a semantic differential test that was then used to explore their peers' perceptions of appropriate or inappropriate photographs to put up on the German SNS StudiVZ.

These two pieces of research are clear and sharp-eyed and, while small, make valuable contributions in and of themselves. This essay in addition adds value in its reflections on a not often used methodological approach – even with their caution that such participant involvement can risk focus groups going off-topic as their leaders 'go native', and overall tends to be very time expensive. But precisely by being so clear, the report brings into view some issues which need a little reflection. First, Wijnen and Trültzsch talk of the people they research as a 'sample' (p.80). This surely isn't right. A 'sample' is a group who have been selected in ways that ensure that they can be representative of a wider population. In some ways a small matter, it does repeat the tendency of qualitative researchers (including myself, I must admit) to avoid addressing how and why we choose particular groups for our research. Second, they speak of their project managing to increase the 'media literacy' of their participants. This is tempting talk – but it carries the risk of conflating a series of different meanings, unhelpfully. 'Media literacy' here could mean at least the following: greater suspicion of/inoculation against troubling cultural provision; heightened self-awareness or group awareness of their own values in relation to the media; and increased skills in doing things with and about the media. These three belong to different wider discourses and it is risky, to say the least, to allow the differences to be lost under this slippery term.

Third, and to me most signally, I want to note a tension between the frame within which they set their research, and one of their own findings. In tune with what has become something of a mantra in a lot of recent writing about the arrival of new interactive media, Wijnen and Trültzsch open their account with this:

Media are a crucial part of everybody's life-world. People develop individual ways of dealing with media, including interpreting media messages in the context of their daily lives and earlier experience. Traditional agents of socialization, such as family, neighbourhood, school and work, are becoming less important in contemporary society. (p.73)

These apparently anodyne claims are in fact highly arguable – both in the slippage to 'individuals', and – more significantly – in the claim of the reduced role for traditional social agencies. What is interesting then is to note their report that in the first research, on *Austria's Next Top Model*, one of the surprise additions they gained from their participants was a paralleling of the programme's jury system with their experience of school marking systems. This suggests something rather different from that quotation – that new media are rather generating *new ways of doing* family, neighbourhood, school etc. Despite these qualifications, this is a brilliantly clear and insightful essay.

In fact, Wijnen and Trültzsch are here pretty much repeating the claims of the overall book. The book's introduction asserts that the rise of the internet has changed the entire landscape of audiencing, and as a result traditional methods of research are no longer adequate. I accept that these are widely believed, but I don't want them to be accepted without serious enquiry. Certainly I am sceptical of easy one-size explanations, such as the following:

In a contingent world where more and more people live as singles or have friends and families far away – or are just too busy to meet them face-to-face as often as they would like – SNS afford means for enhancing social relations. (p.8)

That might work for some, but it reads like a theory-presumption when generalised to all.

Despite these qualifications and quibbles, I highly recommend this book, for its range, for the insights it gives into one of the largest and most systematic attempts to study contemporary audiences, and for the ways in which it can open up our thinking about concepts and methods.

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