Comparative audience research: A review of cross-national and cross-media audience studies

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Abstract:
The article presents a review of comparative audience research between 2005 and 2015. The selected studies include comparative research that is either cross-national or cross-media. We examine the theoretical frameworks and methods used in current comparative audience research studies, what is compared and how, including examples of current comparative research projects. We then identify key trends in comparative audience research; in particular, we identify emerging themes and research gaps. The review of both cross-media and cross-national audience studies shows that the combination and integration of cross-media and cross-cultural approaches is an emerging theme. Additionally, the results suggest that in both areas more in-depth discussions of methods and methodologies used and the development of comprehensive theoretical frameworks are needed.

Key words: Audience research; comparative research; cross-media; cross-national; literature review

1. Introduction

Opportunities and challenges of comparative media research have long been discussed in media and communication studies and other disciplines (e.g. Kohn, 1987; Livingstone, 2003). Models have been developed in order to classify media systems across nations (e.g. Hallin & Mancini, 2004), and transcultural approaches to comparisons have been suggested (e.g. Hepp & Couldry, 2009). However, sources that explicitly address comparative audience research are only rarely to be found. For example, in the *Handbook of Comparative Communication Research* (Esser & Hanitzsch, 2012), only one chapter on comparing media use and reception can be found (Hasebrink, 2012). Esser (2012) describes the development of comparative communication studies as an 'immature, underdeveloped field' (Esser, 2012: 37[1]). Stark and Magin (2012) for example provide a literature review on the methodological designs of comparative communication studies from 1999 until 2010; however, none of these articles deals with comparative *audience* research in particular. This area is largely neglected in reviews of comparative research. Nevertheless, we can identify an emerging area of comparative audience research that deals with audiences across media (e.g. Jensen & Helles, 2015).

The aim of this article therefore is to examine the field of comparative audience research by conducting a literature review of existing comparative studies on audiences from 2005 to 2015. We examine cross-country as well as cross-media audience research. While most of comparative research has long been focused on cross-national comparisons, in recent years cross-media audience research has emerged as a reaction to increasingly converging media environments (e.g. Hasebrink & Hölig, 2013; Hasebrink *et al.*, 2015). In this article, our aim is to discuss both cross-national and cross-media research in regards to their *comparative* approach. We aim at finding emerging themes and research gaps in contemporary comparative audience research. In particular, we discuss the following questions:

(1) What does current comparative cross-national and cross-media audience research look like in the period 2005-2015, and what have been its achievements?
(2) What are the main topics and themes in cross-national and cross-media audience research?
(3) Which research gaps ('invisible audiences' or neglected media; which countries and which media are outside the scope of comparison) can we find?
(4) What are the challenges of comparative – both cross-national and cross-media – research?

In order to answer these questions, we need to define what we consider as comparative audience research. For this article, we have only included references in the review that are explicitly comparative. For the area of cross-national audience research, we consider cross-national comparative studies those that, in reference to Kohn (1987, p. 714), 'utilize

systematically comparable data from two or more nations'. For the area of cross-media audience research, we consider studies that look at media use across two or more different media types, media platforms, genres and/or devices. This differentiation of the two areas is derived from Bucher (2008, p. 309), who differentiates between a) comparing audiences across different groups and b) comparing audiences across different media. We take this as a starting point in our article in order to systematize the search and analyses. As we will see later, this (analytical) differentiation becomes important because the integration of studies from both areas can be identified as an emerging theme.

2. Methodological Approach

As a first step, we identified articles by searching after the keywords and tags *comparative,* and *cross-media* or *cross-national*. It has to be noted that there is a bias involved in searching for articles with the keywords 'comparative' and 'cross-media/cross-national' because with this we neglect sources that use other terms such as 'media diet' or, instead of being tagged comparative, use other descriptions. In the light of this bias, we integrated other sources in the sample in a second phase that we came across during the review of the sample that was first identified. With this approach of theoretical sampling we created a corpus of 76 references for the literature review. Along with the selection process, we developed criteria for inclusion and exclusion of references. First, we excluded all studies that can be considered comparative research in media and communication but that did not focus on audiences. Second, we only included studies that utilized comparable data about audiences from two or more countries as well as comparable data about audiences that use different (two or more) forms of media. Studies on Diasporas were not included when they either take place in only one territory (Smets, 2013) or when they examine transnational subjectivities (e.g. Georgiou, 2012), and thus are not considered explicit cross-media or cross-national comparative studies. Also, we did not search for the keyword 'transmedia', so studies on transmedia storytelling were not included in our sample. We did not, however, limit the search for references by disciplines so that any studies on media audiences that are comparative in the above-mentioned sense are included, no matter in which field they were conducted. In the following sections, we therefore focus on emerging themes and research gaps that we identified in our literature review from the above-mentioned criteria.

3. Emerging Themes and Research Gaps in Comparative Audience Research

First of all, results show that comparative audience research can still be considered marginal as the figure of 76 references is relatively low compared to other topics. In the following section, we present findings of the review. First, we present findings from cross-national audience research; second, findings from cross-media audience research; and third, we summarize the findings and integrate them in a conclusion.

3.1 Findings of review: Cross-national audience research

In this part of the review, 23 references were reviewed. Six references were eliminated because they were either not concerned with audiences or could not be considered comparative in the above-mentioned sense. Eleven references are to empirical studies and use a comparison as an explicitly applied method/methodology. Six of these empirical studies used a quantitative methodology, and five a qualitative approach, all of which used focus groups. However, it must be mentioned that three of the qualitative studies are articles from one PhD project (Kalviknes Bore, 2010a, 2010b, 2011). As this is a qualitative review, the numbers might not be significant, but rather the interesting part is that methodological approaches in both cases (qualitative and quantitative studies) cannot be considered creative or innovative. Rather, studies stick to traditional methods of the social sciences. Furthermore, it can be observed that references of cross-national audience research are often published by a small group of authors who repeatedly write about the topic. The units of analysis are very heterogeneous, but we mainly found comparisons of European countries with some references including the US. Mostly, studies compared the UK, Germany and Scandinavian countries in different variations.

Furthermore, we found quite a high number of references (12) that present theoretical reflections on comparative audience research.

One of the emerging themes therefore seems to be the theoretical reflection on the field of comparative audience research. Although similar questions have been discussed before, many references between 2005 and 2015 reflect on the chances and challenges of comparative audience research.

One of the research gaps in this regard is the question whether comparative audience research is a field of its own, and how the relationship between comparative audience research and audience research as well as between comparative and transnational audience research can be defined. This question is only touched by short paragraphs in some of the references we reviewed; however, we consider it very important for the advancement of comparative audience research. Additionally, a discussion of the methodologies used in comparative audience research is not yet present to the extent that it deserves. Concluding from our review, we think that there is a need for innovative methods when we look at the limited scope of research methods used in comparative research. In particular, an integration of theoretical and empirical studies is needed so that theoretical assumptions in comparative research can be tested and further developed. Often empirical studies do not reflect on their definition of audiences (or even define their understanding in the first place), theoretical frameworks are usually something other than audience theory.

Also, comparative research on Asian, African and Latin American audiences is absent from the resources we reviewed.[2] Studies with a focus on similarities are also underrepresented (exceptions being Stehling, 2013; Mascheroni *et al.*, 2014).

There are a few recent and on-going research projects involving cross-national comparisons, with international networks to support them, which we would like to take a closer look at. A number of outputs of these projects were among the literature review.

The *Lord of the Rings* **project,** led by Martin Barker and Ernest Mathijs since 2003, involved 20 countries to study the launch and reception of the final part of the film trilogy of J.R.R. Tolkien's books, in 2003-04. The audience study was comprised of a databased questionnaire combining multiple-choice with free-text responses, and follow-up interviews with individuals chosen to typify response-positions from the questionnaire responses (Barker & Mathijs, 2008). A specially devised survey in 14 languages tried to fulfil 'a consciously ambitious attempt to mount the largest and widest audience and reception study yet attempted, of a film or any other cultural product' (Barker & Mathijs, 2012: 664). Cross-cultural comparisons by country, age, class, sex, but also 'by imagined community' (*idem*: 676) were difficult, and ethnicity was left out because of the difficulty of using a pre-given list. Class and cultural capital were investigated through a list of 12 kinds of occupation, and even nation was not presumed to be a unit. The project gathered about 25,000 responses from across the world. Egan & Barker (2006) confess to have let *cross-cultural analysis slide* initially, but eventually the analysis concluded that "there is a broad relationship between the nature of the community of viewers (…), and the pattern of choices of labels for the film", which they relate to 'the length of time Tolkien's work had been in significant circulation in different national contexts' (*idem*: 680).

As a follow-up project, in 2013 Barker, Mathijs along with Matt Hills launched the **World Hobbit Audiences project**[3] with researchers from 46 countries. A questionnaire – the only method – was circulated through the web in 35 linguistic versions, closing in May 2015. It attracted over 36,000 survey completions (21 countries each generating more than 500 responses), which are currently being analysed cross-nationally.[4]

EU Kids Online[5], initiated by Sonia Livingstone in 2006, is a research network focused on children's online opportunities, risks and safety, in dialogue with policy stakeholders.[6] Funded by the European Commission from 2006 until 2014, it brought together 25, 27 and 33 European countries (in phase I, II and III, respectively), and has been adapted to countries outside Europe. A survey conducted in 2010 to a nationally representative, random stratified sample of 1000 children aged 9-16 and one of his/her parent in 25 European countries, resulted in a database of 50,000+ respondents (Livingstone *et al.*, 2011). A country classification based on the level of usage and exposure to risk (Lobe & Olafsson, 2011, p. 65), and a cluster classification based on the types of opportunities, risk, harm and mediation (Helsper *et al.*, 2013) was produced. In 2012-13, nine European countries promoted a qualitative comparative study (interviews and focus groups) about the *meaning of online problematic situations for children* (Mascheroni *et al.*, 2014). There were considerable cultural differences regarding ethical aspects of doing research with children,

including different legal and formal requirements to gain access to school and the children (Mascheroni *et al.*, 2014). The results showed less cross-cultural variation than was to be expected (Smahel & Wright, 2014).

Net Children Go Mobile (2013-14), coordinated by Giovanna Mascheroni, was a derivation from EU Kids Online with an emphasis on mobile media, and included nine European countries. It combined both quantitative and qualitative aspects. Besides a longitudinal perspective between 2010 and 2014 (Livingstone *et al.*, 2014), NCGM provided an analysis of cross-country variations according to the adoption and use of smartphones, consequences of smartphone use in terms of sociability and dependence, online risks and harm, parental mediation, and school regulation and mediation (Mascheroni & Ólafsson, 2014).

3.2 Findings of review: cross-media audience research

In this section, we present findings from the review of cross-media audience research. Almost all of the references are empirical contributions – as opposed to the review of cross-national audience research in which half of the references are theoretical considerations. Similar to the cross-national audience research, the reviewed cross-media studies mostly focus on Western European or US audiences. The majority of the studies employ quantitative methods, usually large-scale (online) surveys. Only five of the cross-media studies reviewed in this section employ solely qualitative methods, such as media diaries, interviews and card-sorting techniques. Some studies have a mixed-method design and combine large-scale quantitative surveys with qualitative methods (e.g. Couldry et al. 2007).[7]

The rationales for cross-media audience research and thus the way that it is conducted differ. Some publications are concerned with the issue of complementarity and substitution of media and compare the use of different media types or technologies (e.g., Bucher & Schumacher, 2007; Rudolph, 2014). Most of the research that was reviewed here however examines the combination of different media types/platforms/genres by users and aims to identify typologies of cross-media use. That means that the comparison is conducted between different patterns of cross-media use.

The knowledge interests guiding the research also vary between the studies that were reviewed. The knowledge interest that is mentioned most is news or information media use and its relation to citizenship and democracy (e.g., Robinson, 2014; Hasebrink & Schmidt, 2012; Schrøder, 2011; Schrøder & Kobbernagel, 2010; Schrøder & Larsen, 2010; Costera-Meijer, 2007; De Waal & Schönbach, 2010; Lee & Yang, 2014; Trilling & Schoenbach, 2013; Pew Research Center, 2008).

There are great differences in what is compared. The media that are usually included are the broad media types (television, radio, newspapers, Internet). Some studies differentiate further between different media platforms or outlets, such as specific offline

newspapers and web newspapers (e.g., De Waal & Schönbach, 2010; Trilling & Schoenbach, 2013), or different media genres such as local free daily or weekly newspapers and national newspapers (e.g., Schrøder & Larsen, 2010). Some studies look not only at media types such as TV and radio but also include gaming (Varga & Nyirő, 2014; Westlund & Bjur, 2014), and/or different media devices as a deductive media category for comparison (e.g., European Audiences project; Costera-Meijer, 2007; Pew Research Center, 2008; Lee & Yang, 2014; Mascheroni *et al.,* 2008; Courtois, Verdegem & DeMarez, 2013; Westlund & Bjur, 2014). A few studies are primarily concerned with one medium such as television (Costera-Meijer, 2007; Finger & Wagner, 2014) or magazines (Perälä, 2014), which is examined in its interrelation with the broader array of media used by the audience as the relevant context.

In regards to emerging themes in cross-media audience research, it has to be noted that, from 2005 to 2015, cross-media research itself can be seen as an emerging theme due to the rising convergence of media environments (cf. Hasebrink & Hölig, 2013). As for gaps, we find that in our sample of cross-media research the use of fictional media content is neglected. The studies that focus on specific topics are almost exclusively centered on news and information use. However, the use of fictional media content forms as much a part of our (media) lives as information-related content.

3.3 *Summary of Findings*

In conclusion, the review of both cross-media and cross-national audience research studies shows that the combination and integration of cross-media and cross-cultural approaches is an emerging theme. A current research project, the European Media Audiences project, led by Klaus Bruhn Jensen (Jensen & Helles, 2015) is an illustration of this (description in grey box below). In the review, we observe that only one (recent) study manages to combine media-oriented and recipient-oriented comparative approaches (Perusko, Vozab & Čuvalo, 2015).

European Audiences project, led by Klaus Bruhn Jensen and Uwe Hasebrink, was set out as not only comparative across media and across countries, but also as a basis for a longitudinal study (Hasebrink *et al.*, 2015). In 2013 it conducted a survey in nine countries[8] with online users about 'access to, use of, and time spent on different media and technological platforms' (Jensen & Helles 2015: 293). This assessed 'the validity of a research design derived from an earlier national study (Jensen & Helles, 2011)' (*ibidem*: 292) focused on cross-media use. The empirical data was subject to a cluster analysis of users (eight different cross-media user profiles) on the 'distinctive ways in which different sociodemographic groups locate themselves in the media landscape overall' (Helles *et al.* 2015: 300); a clustering of countries (three different regions/profiles within Europe (Nimrod, Adoni & Nossek, 2015), related to media system typology by Hallin & Mancini (2004); and a clustering of digital media systems, relating institutional frameworks and audience practices (Perusko, Vozab & Cuvalo, 2015; Damásio *et al.*, 2015).

> Cross-cultural differences were not significant among teenagers, who seem to "have more in common with their foreign peers than with adults in their own respective countries (Nimrod, Adoni & Nossek, 2015: 337)".

Furthermore, in both areas more in-depth discussions of the methodologies used are needed. In particular, the challenges of comparison have to be discussed in cross-media research. That means researchers who conduct comparative audience research must be aware of how and what they are comparing. While this theme is discussed more often in cross-national comparisons, in cross-media research this is still a future task.

Last but not least, theoretical discussions need to be put on the agenda of both fields: while in cross-national audience research quite a few sources are concerned with systematizing the field and developing overarching concepts and models, cross-media audience research encompasses a variety of different concepts, models and terminology with only a few attempts to systematize them.

4. Conclusion and Outlook

To sum up, we found that the integration of cross-national and cross-media audience research is beneficial in two ways. First, we can see that there are many similar research gaps in both of these areas. This also means that these gaps and challenges can be tackled by comparative audience research from different perspectives that might produce a better understanding of audience research as a whole. Secondly, our review shows that there is an emerging theme in comparative audience research, namely integrating cross-national and cross-media. We see a need, on the one hand, to combine theoretical conceptualizations and empirical studies in cross-national audience research and, on the other, to conduct studies on fictional media formats in cross-media audience research. Also, in both areas challenges for longitudinal analysis (e.g. regarding children's digital media use in EU Kids Online, traditional and digital media in European Audiences, etc.) are still on the agenda to be solved.

As an outcome of this small mapping exercise on comparative audience research, we want to mention our future tasks: in a foresight exercise we will examine the question if comparative audience research is indeed a field (yet), what characteristics it possesses and how it will develop during the next 20 years. Also, we want to establish a link to the discussion on big data and critically examine what role if any big data plays in comparative audience research, namely for the presence of large-scale surveys in cross-national and cross-media studies. For this, we plan to conduct interviews with leaders of the above-mentioned projects in order to gain insights into the organization and realization of cross-national and cross-media audience research projects.

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Notes:

[1] Translation from German.

[2] This, however, could also be due to the bias of the selection of journals and databases from Western (and mostly English-speaking) countries. This finding thus shows that there is gap of comparative studies that investigate Asian or South American contexts in these journals.

[3] http://www.worldhobbitproject.org/en/home/

[4] One of the authors of this paper is member of the Hobbit project. The project has not published outputs at the time of writing this paper.

[5] http://www.eukidsonline.net

[6] From the project's website, retrieved in 7-Mar-2015.

[7] In the 'Public Connection' project by Couldry, Livingstone & Markham (2007) the question of what media, and the organization of communication, can contribute to democratic engagement and so to the long-term sustainability of democracy is asked. The researchers used a variety of methods that included diaries (oral and written), interviews and focus groups, as well as a nationwide 1000-person survey. In this sense, it can be categorized as a cross-media project because the researchers emphasized that the project gave no priority to any form of media (p. 50). However, we did not include this reference in our review because we do not consider it comparative in the way we defined it.

[8] Belgium, Croatia, Denmark, Germany, Hungary, Israel, Italy, Poland, and Portugal. The project started from a Task force in COST Action IS0906 Transforming Audiences, Transforming Societies, and each country secured funding for running the survey.