

# From dogmatism to open-mindedness? Historical reflections on methods in audience reception research<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The article traces, from the perspective of audience reception research, the gradual methodological rapprochement of once hostile methodological paradigms: quantitatively oriented uses-and-gratifications research and qualitatively anchored reception research. While recognizing that the methodological differences stem ultimately from different epistemological perspectives, the article describes how these differences have been played out on the terrain of empirical methodologies for conducting fieldwork on audience practices and meanings. The article considers four stages of this rapprochement: (1) antagonistic self-sufficiency; (2) separate camps; (3) self-critical coexistence; and (4) complementarity and collaboration.

*Keywords:* audiences, reception research, methodology, qualitative methods, quantitative methods, mixed methods, methodological pluralism

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## 1 Historical struggles over what is ‘researchable’ in audience research

In 1993 I presented a research paper at a Business Communication conference in Pittsburgh, USA. My paper was about a qualitative reception study of corporate social responsibility, involving 16 informants whom I had interviewed about their sense-making of corporate ads, which presented the company as environmentally responsible, as seeking dialogue with interested publics, etc. (later published as Schröder, 1997). The discussant appointed to provide critical feedback to my paper was very positive, had both words of praise and some suggestions for changes. He concluded his critical remarks by saying: “So altogether I thought it was a very good paper, and I’m sure you could easily do a quantitative thing to it, if you wanted to publish it!”

While this is a true story from the historical world of communication research, at a time when leading scholars were devoting a special issue of *Journal of Communication* (vol. 43, no. 3, 1993) to the discussion of ‘ferment in the field’, I can further narrow down the contours of this reflective essay by sharing a story which is based on an imagined incident from the history of media sociology. This story is a fantasy from the late 1950s by a former student at Columbia University, reported by the American sociologist Todd Gitlin in an article published in 1978:

One of my favorite fantasies is a dialogue between C. Wright Mills and Paul Lazarsfeld in which the former reads to the latter the first sentence of *The sociological imagination*: “Nowadays men often feel that their private lives are a series of traps”. Lazarsfeld immediately replies: “How many men, which men, how long have they felt this way, which aspects of their private lives bother them, do their public lives bother them, when do they feel free rather than trapped, what kinds of traps do they experience, etc. etc. (Gitlin, 1978, p. 91)

These two anecdotes both have to do with what at first sight appear as methodological differences and conflicts, and more specifically disagreements between those who only find insights produced with quantitative methods scientifically legitimate and those who believe that the best way to study people’s lived experiences is through qualitative methods. However, it is well-known that such methodological conflicts are a kind of surface phenomenon, which originates in much deeper epistemological and theoretical differences and conflicts – to do with what scientific knowledge is, and how we can acquire or construct it through theoretical and empirical research: Underneath the methodological concerns and differences, therefore, lurks the distinction between positivism, empiricism and behaviorism on the one hand, and interpretivism and constructionism on the other, often simplistically and stereotypically ascribed to the scientific credos of the social sciences and the humanities, respectively. As Jensen/Rosengren (1990) puts it:

Social-scientific work puts great weight on establishing explicitly operationalized categories of analysis, and on keeping – in principle at least – the phases of theory and hypothesis formation, observation, analysis, interpretation and presentation of results separate from each other. Moreover, the assumption is that the researcher's role in the act of data collection and analysis can and should be minimized. The humanistic tradition, in contrast, assumes that in principle, no distinction can be made between the collection, analysis and interpretation of 'data'. (Jensen/Rosengren, 1990, p. 219)

While it can be argued, of course, that both traditions rely in equal measure on ubiquitous forms of interpretation throughout the research process - because all empirical research takes place in a "sea of interpretation" (Schröder et al., 2003, p. 52) - such differences have also sometimes been anchored in political differences, between so-called *administrative research* on the one hand and critical research on the other (Lazarsfeld, 1941; Gitlin, 1978). Here I shall not go further into these underlying backgrounds, but concentrate on the level of methodologies.

The Lazarsfeld/Mills anecdote was used by Todd Gitlin (1978) to demonstrate the way in which the quantitative paradigm became the dominant one in American communication research in the middle of the twentieth century: It established its hegemony within the communication research community, and declared that communicative phenomena that could not be researched with quantitative methods were, unfortunately, unresearchable.

Similar attitudes reigned in the qualitative research community, for instance, in the humanities and in cultural studies, which were dominated by textual, interpretive approaches which truly loathed the alleged shallowness of quantitative measurement. For instance, Raymond Williams targeted the methodological shortcomings of the quantitative approach as leading to findings with dubious validity (Williams, 1974, p. 119). For Williams this lack of scientific quality made it even more regrettable that the quantitative paradigm had assumed a position of scientific hegemony, and with its "particular version of empiricism [...] claims the abstract authority of 'social science' and 'scientific method' as against all other modes of experience and analysis" (Williams, 1974, p. 121; see also Schröder, 2013).

In the area of audience research the rejection by qualitative scholars of the rationale of quantitative methods of audience measurement reared its head particularly in the total rejection by radical constructionist audience ethnographers of any attempt to generalize findings about audience practices beyond the particular situation in which the data were obtained. For instance, the Dutch media ethnographer Ien Ang insisted that the necessary "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, p. 160)

Before I move on to the central argument of this essay, in which I describe what I see as four different historical scenarios of methodological development in audience reception research, a few comments about the title of this essay are in order. First, I end the title with a question mark: This is because that although I do believe that overall in audience research there has been a move from dogmatism to open-mindedness, perhaps the shift is not as clear-cut and complete as the recent methods textbooks' unanimity about the desirability of methodological pluralism appears to imply (Greene, 2007; Bryman, 2001). Out there in the real world of university research institutions one often encounters research environments that are still in the grip of myopic methodological strait-jackets, in which the issue of methods is not a matter of choice but of prescription.

Secondly the title implies a development from something negative to something positive – dogmatism is rarely thought of as a good thing, and open-mindedness, conversely, is usually a buzzword: However, when one of my co-panelists at the Brussels workshop (see note 1) saw my title she asked polemically, could one also say that the methodological development went “from firm principles to general woolliness?” (Sonia Livingstone, personal communication). The polemical response could be that at least “woolliness” feels warmer than dogmatism. But on a more serious note, I do believe that there is some truth to Livingstone's implicit claim: It is a problem, and has been over the last twenty years or so, that too many researchers are not rigorous enough in the way they handle methodological craftsmanship (see also Höijer, 1990).

Thirdly, I have inserted the word “reception” after the word “audience”. This is due to the fact that I cannot claim to speak about the vast field of “audience research” as a whole. The issue that I address here, then, is the narrower one about how dogmatically qualitative audience reception researchers have looked upon quantitative methods, and how dogmatically quantitative audience researchers (especially those coming from the uses-and-gratifications tradition) have looked upon qualitative reception research.

Finally, before I start, a note of caution about my own position in these methodological debates: What I'll give you here is not an impartial helicopter look at the field of audience reception studies, but rather a personal reflection in the form of snapshots taken by someone who, anchored in the qualitative tradition, was and is one of the contestants in the game - someone who has intervened from time to time in the cross-disciplinary discussions about audience research methodologies since the late 1980s (see for instance, Schröder, 1987, 1999; Schröder/Kobbernagel, 2010).

The driving force behind my interest in the cross-fertilization of paradigms and methodologies has been a concern with how to achieve **greater explanatory power** for the knowledge we build through research. I formulated this as an ideal in the 1987 article:

One of the tasks ahead will consist in conceptualising 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. (Schröder, 1987)

The overall goal of ‘greater explanatory power’ can be fulfilled by many kinds of actualization of methodological pluralism, most frequently by combining different methods in a research design which **juxtaposes different methods** (qualitative and quantitative), applying one after the other. This is what many researchers have done, some with great success, but also with many difficulties – see, for instance, Livingstone and Lunt’s analysis of TV studio debate programs (Livingstone/Lunt, 1994); the generation by Jensen et al. of a typology of television viewers (Jensen et al., 1994); or Barker and Mathijs’s cross-cultural Lord of the Rings audiences project (Barker/Mathijs, 2007).

But the ideal expressed in the 1987 quotation is really about something more ambitious than the juxtaposition of methods: it talks about the **integration of different methods** within one research design (“preserving qualitative data through a process of quantification”), in order to be able to generalize one’s findings by discerning a patterning in the data. I have tried to implement such an integrative method in my recent study of news consumption in the cross-media news landscape (Schröder/Kobbernagel, 2010).

## 2 Brief historical trajectory of audience reception research: Four scenarios

Returning to the historical relationship between audience research paradigms, I am going to suggest, heuristically, that there have been four kinds of relationships between the quantitative and qualitative paradigms for researching audience uses and reception of media. I label the four scenarios: (1) Antagonistic self-sufficiency; (2) Separate camps; (3) Self-critical coexistence; and (4) Complementarity and collaboration.

These scenarios can be seen as following a chronological path, but they also overlap to a considerable extent. Also, it should be pointed out that the picture is more complex than the four neatly defined scenarios make it seem: throughout the existence of audience reception research since the early 1980s there have been ‘misfits’ – scholars who, while coming out of one of the camps, have nevertheless argued that both approaches are legitimate ways to explore audience uses and meanings of the media (Lewis, 1997), and some have them-

selves practiced both qualitative and quantitative research, emphasizing their appropriateness for different kinds of knowledge building (see for instance Höijer, 1990; Liebes/Katz, 1986; Livingstone, 1988; Livingstone/Lunt, 1994).

*(1) Antagonistic self-sufficiency*

In this scenario the quantitative and qualitative researchers say to each other: “Your way of doing research has no or little scientific value!” (this sort of condescension was the import of some of the quotations already presented above). In 1986, Klaus Bruhn Jensen defined reception research as inherently and necessarily qualitative:

In general, reception research is concerned with qualitative approaches to the audience experience of the mass media: it sees meaning production as an unfolding process in which the audience negotiates and establishes the categories of meaning. The qualitative approach to meaning as a process can [...] be characterized further in contrast to the quantitative approach to meaning as products. (Jensen, 1986, p. 70)

For the sake of historical accuracy it should be said that already at this point Jensen was arguing for the usefulness of both qualitative and quantitative methods to explore audiences (Jensen, 1986, p. 299), but he strongly advocated the need to study audience meanings’ with qualitative methods. This position was strongly supported by audience ethnographer James Lull, who pointed out the methodological shortcomings of uses-and-gratifications research:

The primary research method employed in uses and gratifications research, the field survey, does not work very well in sweaty environments. [...] I came to grips fully with the inadequacies of social science methodology as it is taught in the major American graduate schools and practiced by the vast majority of publishing scholars in our field. There simply was no way to represent numerically the essence of what thousands of young people had experienced during the concert or what the cultural meaning of music is to them generally. (Lull, 1985, p. 219)

From the other camp, uses-and-gratifications scholar Karl Erik Rosengren, staunch knight of the quantitative cause, launched vehement attacks on the sloppiness of qualitative reception research. Qualitative reception research, Rosengren says, “is based on anecdotal data and defined as unformalized, exegetic studies of the meaning of individual experiences [...]. These studies, as a rule, neglect otherwise generally accepted tests of reliability, validity, and representativeness” (Rosengren, 1993, p. 13).

A few years later, in his review of Jensen’s book *The social semiotics of mass communication*, Rosengren launched an even more vehement attack on the qualitative paradigm as epitomized by Jensen:

[...] time is long overdue for Klaus Jensen to leave his qualitative fortress, to pick up some of his interesting findings, regarding them as hypotheses to be tested with reliable and valid measurements carried out on a representative sample of some theoretically and/or empirically interesting population (Rosengren, 1996, pp. 139-140)

Curiously, some years before, in 1990, Jensen and Rosengren had coauthored an article advocating the desirability of a confluence of paradigms. Apparently their joint argument was based on a fairly tenuous consensual platform, which left their underlying disagreements visible, for instance, in subtle formulations about qualitative research. After saying that “any large experiment and/or quantitative survey <should> be preceded by small qualitative studies”, they clearly didn’t agree on what else qualitative methods were good for: Granting that “qualitative methodologies remain relevant as indispensable generators of insights and hypotheses”, they could only agree to say that “*representatives of the humanistic research traditions suggest that, in certain respects, qualitative studies may have independent explanatory value regarding the reception and uses of media*” (Jensen/Rosengren, 1990, p. 221, my emphasis). In other words, their agreement didn’t stretch as far as saying that qualitative approaches do have independent explanatory value regarding the reception and uses of media!

## *(2) Separate camps*

In this ‘Live and let live’ scenario the quantitative and qualitative audience researchers meet each other with an attitude of “You do your thing, and I’ll do mine!”

The Pittsburgh incident, which opened this essay can be seen as an example of this scenario: Although the quantitative discussant of the qualitative paper would not go as far as publishing the qualitative analysis without a measure of quantitative fortification, he had left the stage of hostile diatribes far behind and approached the Other in a friendly, dialogical manner.

Another example has to do with the way audience researchers form scholarly tribes within the framework of an international research association like the International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR). In the late 1980s Klaus Bruhn Jensen established an IAMCR Working Group in qualitative reception research called NEQTAR (Network for Qualitative Audience Research). In IAMCR there already existed a related section in the field of Audience Research, chaired by a researcher from the British Broadcasting Corporation. This section focused on media companies’ need to survey the audience market through quantitative audience measurement. Jensen proposed a form of cooperation, for instance, joint meetings or possibly even a

merging of the groups, but was turned down by his colleague. Jensen remembers (personal communication) that there was no confrontation, just complete indifference from the quantitative camp – they were simply “worlds apart”!

### (3) *Self-critical coexistence*

When we move into this scenario, the qualitative and quantitative researchers can be imagined to say to each other: “We play in the same sandbox, we don’t play with you – but we’re interested in what you are doing, because we are not entirely satisfied with our own achievements!” Here is the self-critique of the quantitative camp as formulated by Keith Roe, a prominent member of the uses-and-gratifications paradigm:

We dismiss the qualitative criticism as ‘unscientific’ and if someone breaks ranks from within, the usual response is to offer platitudes, dismiss the heretic as a methodological purist (if not troublemaker), and promptly go back to business as usual. This strategy [...] has prevented any real methodological development and has given extra ammunition to critics (Roe, 1996, p. 87)

Walter Gantz, key American uses-and-gratifications scholar, argued along similar lines that it was time to learn from the qualitative camp:

The research agenda is likely to require alternative, if not innovative methods of data collection. [...] gratifications scholars will need to supplement survey research with depth interviews, where respondents are given ample opportunity to reflect and describe the nature of their relationship with media content (Gantz, 1996, pp. 26-27)

Self-criticism in the qualitative camp was offered, for instance, by the Swedish audience researcher Birgitta Höijer, who advised her fellow qualitative researchers to be more systematic and rigorous about their empirical work: “From one or two concrete, vivid instances we assume that there are dozens more lurking in the bushes – but we don’t verify whether or how many there are, and there are usually fewer than we think” (Höijer, 1990, p. 19).

In the area of international communication research associations, in contrast to Jensen’s early 1990s experience in IAMCR, the Audience and Reception Studies section (ARS) of the European Communication Research and Education Association (ECREA, est. 2007) was founded on the principle of co-existence of paradigms, as explicitly stipulated in the section program: “The section welcomes various approaches (theoretical/critical works, methodological discussions or empirical studies) and methods (quantitative or qualitative research, or both) and encourages works that cross disciplines and traditional boundaries.” (<http://www.ecrea.eu/divisions/section/id/1>; accessed 22 December 2015).



However, the Section's name – audience *and* reception studies – still reflects the separate research traditions that are here being brought together under the same organisational umbrella.

#### *(4) Complementarity and collaboration*

I have labeled the last scenario of reception research 'complementarity and collaboration', because members of the audience research community have been arguing along epistemological, theoretical and methodological lines for the **complementarity** of methodologies. This view has been gaining ground during the last 10 years or so. For instance, Jensen has argued that

[...] the methodologies that constitute the field are different, but equal. They are complementary, not reducible to each other. They may be unified, not in the first instance – at the level of minimal measurements – but in the final instance – in concluding a process of inquiry, in a context, and for a purpose. (Jensen, 2012, pp. 283-284; see also Greene, 2007; Bryman, 2001)

Some have adopted a rather pragmatic stance to the implementation of mixed method research designs, holding 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, p. 454).

Others have insisted that it is necessary to sort out the epistemological quandaries accompanying the mixing of paradigms, in order to achieve absolute clarity about the knowledge claims that one can make for multimethod research findings (Schröder, 2012). A key argument has been that, epistemologically, complementarity can be based on a version of critical realism, which does not privilege numerical over discursive evidence, but provides a platform for bringing them together (Deacon et al., 1999; Danermark et al., 2002; Jensen, 2012; Eriksson, 2006; Schröder et al., 2003).

The label for the last scenario also includes the notion of **Collaboration**, because the current age is characterized by a number of large-scale, often cross-national collaborative research projects, which are methodologically versatile. Examples include the *EU Kids Online* project (Livingstone/Haddon, 2009) and the *Lord of the Rings* project (Barker/Mathijs, 2007). These and other projects have struggled to achieve the objectives of methodologically complementary research, and to work out not just how to do it, but also how to bring together interpretively the complex findings built from the different methods.

The objectives of complementarity and collaboration are also built into the platform of the COST Action *Transforming Audiences – Transforming Societies* (2010-2014), which organised the cross-generational workshop at which this essay was first presented. The Action's memorandum of understanding explicitly stated that the purpose was not just to bring researchers together, but to encourage collaboration across paradigms: "This Action will explicitly encourage methodological innovation and cross-paradigm research to counter traditional, often unproductive separations" (Memorandum of Understanding, p. 5; see the Action website <http://www.cost-transforming-audiences.eu/>)

One arena in which the exploration of complementarity took place under the auspices of the Action was a Special Issue of the journal *Participations*, whose guest editors spanned the paradigmatic divide. With the title *Exploring the methodological synergies of multimethod audience research*,

[...] the Special Issue aims to develop a candid and constructive dialogue between different scholarly approaches to the exploration of audience practices. We seek contributions which reflect on and implement multi-method approaches to all aspects and dimensions of the practices and sense-making activities of media audiences and users.

The purpose of the Special Issue is thus to demonstrate and discuss how precisely dialogues between research paradigms within audience research may contribute to enhance the explanatory power of theory-driven fieldwork studies of contemporary media audiences. (Text of the Call for Papers 2012)

It may be that in this essay I have somewhat simplified the historical relations and tensions between different methodological paradigms in the area of audience reception research. But perhaps the best evidence that there has been a development from dogmatism to open-mindedness, and not just to methodological 'woolliness', is that the wording of this Call for Papers would have been unthinkable thirty, twenty and maybe even ten years ago.

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