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The writing of a research proposal based on "the five-question-pie chart"

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Introduction

A proper research question forms the backbone of every scholarly study. In principle each research question originates from a specific question you want to ask concerning a certain phenomenon or process in reality and an idea of what the answer to your question could be, a hypothesis. Your interest in the phenomenon, the formulation of the research question and the hypothesis form the source for developing a scholarly research question. Therefore, it is advisable to write down your provisional research question and hypothesis at the beginning of your research process, and after that you specify your definitive research question based on the following *five principle guidelines*.

- **What** exactly are you going to research? What is the specific *phenomenon* of which you want to broaden your perception? By means of which specific *case* are you going to proceed?

- **Why** do you want to conduct this research? What is your *motivation*? What will be the contribution of your research to existing scholarly perceptions and what is the social significance of your research, in short: what is the *scholarly* and *social relevance* of the research?

- **Within** which framework do you want to perform your research? From which perspective will you approach the phenomenon, which scholarly *theories* or *models* will you choose as source(s) for your research, helping you to describe, analyse, interpret and explain the phenomenon?

- **How** will you proceed? What is the *approach*, how do you, by means of a scholarly controlled *method*, generate data and how will you analyse and interpret these in order to get an answer to your research question and to test your hypothesis?

- **Which** specific *question* do you put forward? And what expectations form the guideline of your research? Which answer do you think you can, give to your specific research question, by means of your research? What are the expectations with regard to the research results which you will formulate as *hypothesis*?

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[1] The original Dutch version of this text is published on http://www.uu.nl/hum/staff/EMueller1/0. This English version is to be annotated according to the MLA-conventions as: Müller, E. "Writing a research propoal based on 'the five-question-pie chart'", transl. Berber Hagedoorn (2007).

Research question based on *"the five-question-pie chart"*
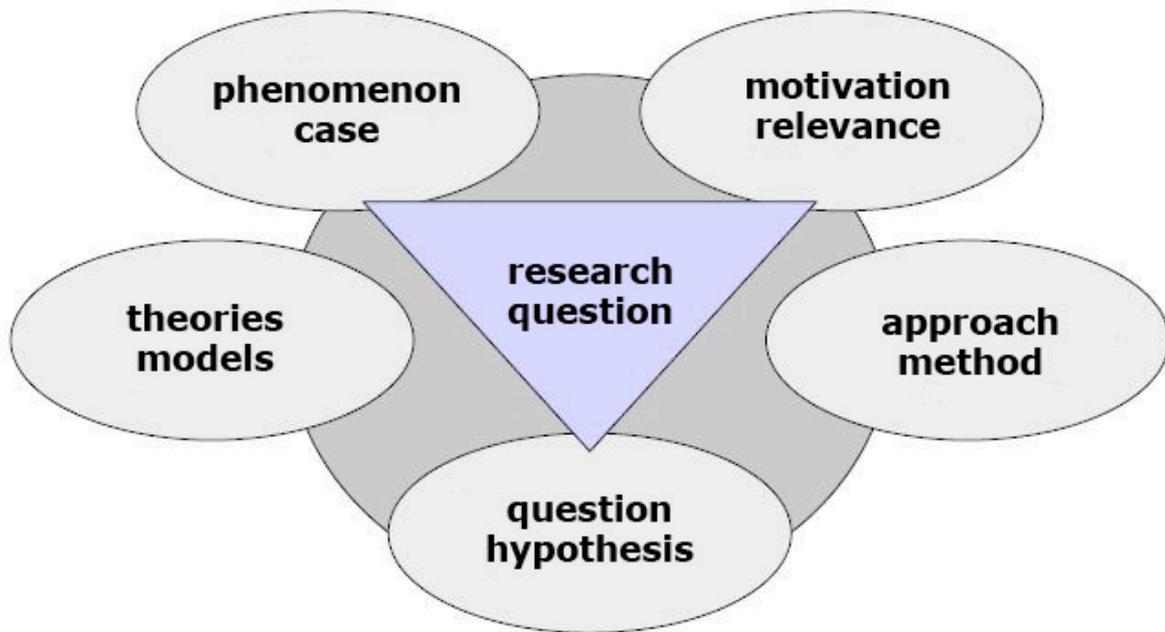
1. Phenomenon | case : *What exactly are you going to research?*

The motivation to do research is related to a *phenomenon* you think it is striking, astonishing and of social value and about which you would like to gain more knowledge. Which links between media and cultural or social phenomena are appealing to you? Do media technologies or media products play a specific part in this? Which links aren't common knowledge yet? What could be the social relevance in order to gain a better perception? To what extent could these links turn out to be a lead to central theoretical debates in media studies? Formulate several options in a brainstorming session. Some examples are stated below:

- "Retro-programmes on TV and cultural memory";
- "Action films and views on masculinity";
- "Mobile phones and relation management";
- "Football fans and internet communities".

It is important that each time you ask yourself what could form the specific *case* of the research to be able to perform research into that phenomenon. Therefore, define your research material properly. Which retro-programmes on TV or actions films are you referring to, by means of which group and which geographic location will you examine the use of mobile phones, which fan club of which football-club are you investigating by means of which internet-site?

Suppose that by drawing up a list of possible subjects you indeed come across so-called "retro-programmes" such as *I love the 80's* or *I love the 90's*. You are inclined to think that such programmes are broadcasted more frequently on television. What is the reason for this and what kind of cultural phenomenon is it? You get the feeling that there is something interesting to mention about this – something that you won't be able to take in by just reading

an article in a paper, by searching for a definition or by thinking hard about it. What relation could there be between the increase, the content and the form of such programmes and the historical notion of the public of these programmes? Can the growth of these programmes be considered purely a commercial strategy in order to seize upon the changing way in which certain target groups think about the recent past? Is it more or less coincidental, following from a low production costs devised format that appears to be successful and suddenly emerges everywhere? For example, you continue as follows: my parents enjoy watching these programmes, and I myself in fact also, but in my view for a different reason. To whom does it appeal? Why is it successful with different groups? What impression is given of the 1980's or 1990's? To what extent does this differ from other images of the recent past? To what extent would these programmes be able to change the outlook on the recent past? In your opinion, no serious research has been conducted into these programmes, so far. You also think that in general little research has been carried out regarding the relationship between contemporary television and cultural memory. You also gather that on the basis of this subject you could possibly contribute to general insights into the relationship between media, culture and society; you want to make links between the economics/production of these types of programmes, their content and form, and their reception. By doing so you come about a research question in which the phenomenon and a good delimited specific case are mentioned: "The relation between retro-programmes on Dutch television and the cultural memory: a discourse analytical research into the interpretation of the recent past in *I love the 80's*."

So, a proper scholarly research in general creates a certain *link* between a *case* (events, media products, media technologies, etc.) and a cultural or social *phenomenon*. You will develop the objective in doing so further along in your definition, by stipulating more closely what type of research question you essentially put forward: is it describing, explanatory, comparative, assessing, recommending, contesting or hypothesis-testing research? (see also point 5)

2. Motivation | relevance : *Why do you do want to conduct this research?*

The motivation to do research originates from social and scholarly questions. You can base your *scholarly motivation* by putting your research into a specific tradition. You try to find a connection to an earlier line of investigation within your discipline. In this manner, you can for example continue an inspiring study by adding questions or by setting up a similar examination but this time centred on another programme, medium, country or another target group. But you can also question the correctness of existing studies or insights and demonstrate, by means of your own research, that a more convincing interpretation or declaration for the specific phenomenon can be found. You can also indicate breaches in scholarly knowledge, so-called "desiderata", blind spots on the scholarly map, for example for the reason that hardly any research has been done into a certain phenomenon whereas the newspapers continuously voice their opinion about it. The *scholarly motivation* of a study therefore assumes a certain overview concerning the scholarly field: your aim will always be to put your research into a scholarly context and to prove the specific – connecting or contiguous – phrasing of the question with respect to previous research. Suppose that research into the phenomenon of retro-programmes on television has already been performed by a media-economist. In this study the phenomenon is purely explained by the fact that the broadcasting co-corporations and channels have access to cheap or free archive material and therefore are able to produce low-cost programmes by recycling the stored material. Although this is an interesting conclusion, you might not find this outcome satisfactory, as cheap production in itself is no explanation for the success of the programmes. In contrast, you argue that cultural factors play a role and therefore, your research refers to a cultural

explanation of the phenomenon. You have the idea that these types of programmes have something to do with enjoying nostalgic feelings, a sort of "nostalgia" for the recent past. You try to find examples of similar research in order to find a lead for your own set-up.

The social relevance of research in the field of media studies is sometimes hard to specify. It is often aimed at obtaining better insights into recent cultural or social developments in which the media play a certain role. Or it concerns the question how and why certain media structures arise and how and why these structures change. If for example a study into retro-programmes and the cultural memory in the Netherlands proves that these programmes indicate a specific interpretation of the recent past, you will be able to place the results of this research within the context of the debate concerning Dutch identity.

Your aim will always be to obtain more insight into the cultural meaning of a certain media-related phenomenon that occurs in society. Of course, there are issues applicative within the media and communication sciences like, for example, research into the value of "language programmes" on local television channels for the benefit of the integration process of newly arrived immigrants. These perceptions can sometimes be converted to policies or marketing strategies, but this is no requirement for every scholarly study in media studies.

3. Theories | models : *Within which are you going to research the phenomenon?*

According tot Abraham Kaplan (3) nothing is more practical than a proper theory. A theory is a resource during the research process. Understanding a theory is like putting on "special glasses" in order to see or understand certain aspects of the phenomenon and the case more clearly. In a certain way, theories first of all help you "to construct" the subject of your research: you can understand a theory *as a coherent and consistent set of judgements concerning the essence of a certain subject*. By means of this set of judgements concerning the subject of your research you define what is happening (or not). According to philosopher of science Karl R. Popper, theories act as "searchlights" (346): they help you to discover what is interesting, how you can understand this perfectly and how you can select your research question. For this reason it is significant to look upon your theoretical framework as "the theoretical basis" of your research.

If, for example, you comment critically on an imaginary media-economic study into retro-programmes on TV, you assume that you must consider this phenomenon in a different way, therefore within another tradition in media studies research. You argue that factors which have been left aside in the economic research must be examined more closely in order to obtain a better perception of the phenomenon. By doing so in fact you already imply another perception or another "model" of the phenomenon. For example, in your research you want to examine cultural aspects of the phenomenon more closely: why are retro-programmes popular now? How is their reception? Which discourse concerning the past is constructed in these programmes?

A theory is therefore nothing more (and nothing less) than a basis in order to be able to formulate expectations concerning the structure of what you want to research but of which you do not yet know how it will work out. Try to find theoretical concepts which can be related to your phenomenon and the case of your research, your observations and especially your research question. Try to get hold of the most interesting aspects of your research subject by using theoretical perspectives. Always begin with the subject which you mentioned as the first basic indication of your phenomenon and the case of your research such as "retro-programmes and *cultural memory* in the Netherlands." When we take "retro-programmes" as an example, these aspects could be, amongst others, the following:

- media-economy, multiple exploitation, industrial culture, marketing;
- cultural memory, canonizing, media as an audio-visual archive;
- amusement, nostalgia, alienation, "camp";
- media and identity, taste, "fandom".

Always use the terminology customary in the field, but be creative in looking for theoretical frameworks! In the end carefully thought-out theoretical choices will enable you to focus on your research and to coordinate the phrasing of the question, the theory and the method. When you stipulate the theoretical basis of your research, you make a specific choice which you justify clearly: which theoretical basis are you choosing and why?

Often you will as a first step position your research mainly in a certain theoretical tradition which you find stimulating and promising for your research. However, it won't be enough to simply mention disciplinary denominations like *sociological, psychological,* and/or *culturally critical*, as each disciplinary denomination itself consists of the most divergent theoretical mainstreams. Even when you choose "the" *ideology critical* approach or "the" *cultural studies* approach, you will have to position your research specifically within your approach. You aim to specify your theoretical basis by means of authors and texts in which the theory is explained in more detail.

A theory never formulates an eternal truth, but forms a so called heuristical model of that which you are about to study, a tool to get hold of a certain phenomenon in a scholarly manner. For this reason, during the research process a theory is always part of the debate. In short: theories create orientation but are not sacrosanct. If for instance you got the feeling that retro-programmes have something to do with the enjoyment of nostalgic sensations, it won't be sufficient to simply refer to a theory on nostalgia and to subsequently contrast the characteristics of retro-programmes to a set of coherent and consistent judgements concerning nostalgia. It is much more likely that the theory on nostalgia forms the basis in order to put forward your specifically chosen research questions.

4. Approach | method : *How do you set to work?*

Whereas the theory determines within which framework or from which perspective you will be looking at the phenomenon, approach and method define *how* you actually set to work. The choice of your method ensues from the phenomenon, the theoretical basis and of course your specific presentation of the research question. You choose a basis and a method which – with regard to the theoretical basis – is arranged to generate an answer to your research question. The specific research method defines, as it happens, how you collect information, data, and sources in a systematic and verified manner and how you also analyse and interpret these in a systematic manner to be able to give a scholarly basis to your research question. You will be asking yourself what specific action you are going to undertake and in which order to be able to conduct your research, and how you can justify this methodically. In the first place, you can define your approach by aiming at aspects of:

A) production and production conditions,
B) media products and programmes, or
C) reception and claims on media products

Frequently you will perform research investigating the link between two of these three aspects. In general you will already have decided on a certain direction by defining the phenomenon and the case of your research and by outlining the theoretical basis. However,

make sure that the approach of your research fits the chosen phenomenon and especially the case.

In media studies, there are research traditions where theory and method go hand in hand and therefore are described as a "methodology". The *discourse analysis* for example not only implies a distinctive "technical" approach and execution of the research, but also originates from certain theoretical assumptions concerning the social function of social discourses, i.e. the assumption that these determine our view of the world (see Philips/Hardy 3-11). But frequently the relation between the theoretical basis and the specific methods differ from one another in the sense that the theoretical framework by definition defines only one research method. When you perform reception-research you can do so, like the overview below shows, in several ways. Thus, from a certain theoretical basis you can often use several methods, certainly also in combination with each other. However, it is obvious that within a certain theoretical framework you will discover that some methods are more suitable than others and that some simply are inapt. For example, you can't perform observational ("ethnographical") research into media texts, but you can study reception processes and even production processes. You may perform a discourse analysis into political legislation and especially into a certain selection i.e. a "corpus" of medium texts, but this approach as well as the quantitative content analysis does not correspond with the "active audience" approach. But yet you can support an "active audience" approach and exclusively perform textual analysis when you assume that, on the contrary, the polysemy of media texts initiate divergent interpretations by various (groups) recipients.

The following list shows a general orientation on several research approaches and different methods which are commented on in various handbooks concerning media research and communication studies research (see bibliography):

A) focus on production and production conditions of media and media texts:
- analysis of the media system
- political-administrative analysis of political legislation
- analysis of media organisations and companies
- analysis of production processes

B) focus on media texts:
- textual analysis (aesthetic/dramaturgy, ideology-critical, discourse-analytical)
- content analysis (quantitative or qualitative)

C) focus on reception processes:
- qualitative reception analysis (focus groups; in-depth interviews; participant observation)
- quantitative reception analysis (survey/questionnaire with open-ended or closed-ended questions)

Ask yourself the question which method is most appropriate for your theoretical basis and your research question. Which sources, information and data have you already gained access to (media texts, policies, research reports, ego documents such as homepages or weblogs on the Internet, etc.) or do you gain access to your sources and data as a first step into your research? If so, how do you get this done, by means of group discussions, interviews, participant observation, content analysis or questionnaires? How do you obtain these data, what is their necessity and how will you analyse and interpret this information? What information do you need exactly in order to be able to answer your question: complete texts,

how many of them, or fragments from texts, and what is your selection procedure? Or in case you wish to do research into reception: how do you gather respondents or groups of respondents for your research, how do you justify your selection, how many groups or respondents are you going to approach?

Moreover, you also make a well-considered decision concerning the question whether you want to perform a more small-scale *exploring* research into a new or not yet in detail studied phenomenon or that you want to conduct a more large scale *representative* survey. In media and communication science there are many pro- and contra preconceptions concerning these approaches, and often the distinction between empirical and hermeneutic-analytical, between quantitative and qualitative, between representative and exploring approaches and methods is denoted as the difference between objective scholarly methods and purely subjective considerations. This conception is just as persistent as inept: both approaches demand a systematic and tested working method during the research process, and both at times contain empirical, creative as well as interpretative steps (see Deacon et al. 1-13). However, it has be mentioned that qualitative or hermeneutic-analytical research is in the first place more interested in cultural detonation, the differentiated, frequently critical analysis of processes aiming at their improved understanding. On the other hand, quantitative research is more interested in representative or experimentally founded judgements and rules with the aim to be able to predict, influence or guide cultural and social processes (such as detonation). However, mind pitfalls like: the difference between empirical and hermeneutic-analytical methods is not the same as between quantitative and qualitative methods. A small-scale observational study into the reception of retro-programmes by immigrant families - a qualitative treatment therefore - is for example empirical by nature: you collect the data which you will process eventually in a hermeneutic-analytical manner, by accurate observation of processes in reality. But the quantitative content analysis of a corpus of media texts, for example research into the representation of the protest generation in retro-programmes, is also empirical by nature, even if only exclusively media texts form the basis and material of the research.

During your study you will constantly be occupied with this type of questions. It is important that you make a justified methical choice which fits the presentation of the questions, the phenomenon as well as the theoretical basis. Nor one methical approach nor the other is more objective or more subjective by advance than the other. Scholarly "objectivity" only exists approximately and assumes a systematic, regulated and methodically as well as theoretically justified working method during the research process (see Silverman, 1-13). You determine the specific manner of performing research by means of the choice and the justification of your research method.

5. Research question | hypothesis: *Which specific question will you put forward?*

The definitive formulation of the research question puts it to the test: from the perspective of the other four aspects of the definition of the problem the definitive research question shows the specific research interest with regard to the phenomenon, the case of the research, the motivation, the relevance, the theoretical basis and the choice of the specific research method. There are several types of research questions:

1. the *descriptive* research question is suitable when you have to deal with a new phenomenon for which it is first of all important to explore this phenomenon;

2. the *comparative* or *comparing* research question is suitable when you are able to get more insight into the specific character of a certain phenomenon by means of the comparison of similar phenomena;

3. the *explanatory* research question aims to make (causal) links between several phenomena and cultural or social developments;

4. the *evaluating* research question is suitable when you want to attain assessing judgements concerning phenomena or measures;

5. the *recommending* research question is aimed at giving advice concerning cultural or social questions;

6. the *contesting* research question aims to develop a proper theoretical declaration or methodical approach in order to develop a certain phenomenon;

7. the *hypothesis-testing* research question refers to empirically reviewing a clearly formulated hypothesis by means of an experimental research.

In general, a proper research question urges the researcher to write an *analysis* concerning these phenomena, which inch by inch provides *insight* into links *between* phenomena, events, developments, factors etc., instead of writing a pure description of a certain phenomenon in the field of media, culture and society.

But the exact formulation of a proper research question is a skill in itself. At the start of the research process, research questions are generally far too broadly formulated. A question like: "What is the influence of the media on society?" can't be put into practice in a scholarly study. Also, a research question like: "What has been the meaning of new media on the construction of the identity of young Dutch people since 1995?" is still far too wide-ranging. After all, which new media, which aspects of identity construction and/or which groups of young Dutch people are you referring to? Apply the principle when formulating your research question by following the first-class advice of David Silverman, author of a handbook about qualitative socio-scientific research: "Rather say *much* about a *small* subject than *little* about a *large* subject"(5).

Furthermore, so-called "closed-ended" questions as a rule put you on the wrong track. Definition questions such as "Is Steven Spielberg's E.T. a thriller?" do not yield interesting research, as the answer can only be *yes* and *no*. Moreover, even if you would prove that it is a thriller or not, what in fact would you have actually proved? But a research question such as "Do retro-programmes play a role in the integration of immigrant men above 50 having lived in the Netherlands since 2000?" can also be answered with a simple *yes* and *no*. In this specific formulation, the research question does not force you to explain *how* retro-programmes played a role in integration processes, which role they played and *to what extent* we can consider that role as positive or as negative and it also is not answering the question *why*. Especially in answering these types of questions could lie the added value of your research.

For this reason, always formulate your research question in the form of an "open-ended", but nevertheless goal-oriented question. Often the words "how", "in which manner", "to what extent", "which", "why" are sufficient to transform a closed-ended question into an open-ended question. However, there is a catch: research questions that start off with "how" can put you on the right track and force you to gain *perception* into something, but they can also proof you totally wrong and push you in the direction of a purely descriptive narrative.

The question "How did X develop itself?" can lead to a purely descriptive account: "At first there was this and then came that, and then, and then…" Other words which may be useful for you by writing an essay are: "interpret", "consider as" ("how can we interpret X with reference to Y?"; "to what extent can we consider Y as being Z?") To raise a corner of the veil by writing an essay concerning references between developments, it is advisable to use words as "link", "proportion", "relation", "cause", "consequence", "interaction", "role", "meaning", "in which proportion", "to what extent interaction" and "what role played?" when formulating your research question. Moreover, it is advisable to give an indication in your research question of your interpretive framework which you define by your theoretical basis.

Eventually, aim to ask only one question. When you are asking several questions, stipulate which question is the leading question and which questions are derivative sub-questions - to what extent are these questions helpful in order to obtain an answer to your leading question.

Each definition not only originates from a research question which you can put forward concerning a certain phenomenon, but is generally also postulated from an intuitive expectation or idea concerning what the answer to your research question could be. By clarifying and defining the motivation and relevance of your research, by formulating this intuition as the theoretical basis and the research methods you can eventually define this as the *hypothesis* of your research. Even if you do no hypothesis-testing research on a smaller scale, you try to formulate this expectation. Of course it is not the purpose of your research to prove this expectation or hypothesis recklessly. That would be short-sighted. By formulating your expectation or hypothetical justification you rather give account concerning implicit presuppositions and convictions which will always play a role by defining a problem or by performing the research. Formulating expectations or hypotheses can help you to work purposefully *and* to look critically at your own implicit presuppositions. Thus do not hesitate to set aside your hypothesis if your research results appear to indicate a different direction. Formulating a research question and hypothesis is a *dynamic* process.

"The five-question-pie chart" – not just ticking the boxes

Developing a definition is both a creative and a formal process. You lay intuitive, associative links between phenomena, cases, theories, research methods and questions which you can ask while doing so, and at the same time you strive to underpin these links on the basis of scholarly conventions in a scientifically convincing manner.

In practice, you will notice that during several phases of the research you will have to adjust and reformulate certain aspects more or less. At the first stage of the research you will continuously have to highlight your definition by studying existing studies and relevant theoretical literature as well as developing your research method before you will be able to present a definitive, practical research question. While collecting and studying your source material and literature as a rule you will frequently have to refine your hypothesis and probably even have to adapt your research method. Sometimes at this stage of your research - for example by lack or on the contrary excess of sources – you might still have to further restrict your subject and research question. When interpreting your results you might have to alter your provisional position within your theoretical framework. And when writing the definitive essay or research article you might decide that on the basis of your findings you might have to shift the emphasis of the social and scholarly relevance of your research. "The five-question-pie chart" is a circle which you complete several times when developing a definition, and in which all aspects influence and stipulate each other reciprocally.

"The five-question-pie chart" offers you a model to develop and review your research question systematically. However, be conscious of the fact that "the five-question-pie chart"

is a resource to focus on the most important aspects of a definition, it is not a blueprint and it is by no means a matter of simply ticking the boxes!

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