

New Media Studies

Method Reader

There is no special method that guarantees success or makes it probable. Scientists do not solve problems because they possess a magic wand – methodology, or theory of rationality – but because they have studied a problem for a long time, because they know the situation fairly well, because they are not too dumb ...

(Feyerabend, 1975: 8)

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Introduction

This preliminary version of the syllabus 'doing new media studies' aims to provide you with handles to start thinking about the methods you employ in your research, what types of methods are suitable and what constitutes proper research design.

Although it offers an overview of different methods used within media studies, it is by no means meant to be exhaustive. The field of media studies is highly interdisciplinary in nature and new areas such as game studies and techniques like data scraping add even further to its diversity. The focus therefore lies on the methods as employed by members of the department of media and culture studies at Utrecht University in their own research and (master) education. They have each contributed their individual expertise to this syllabus.

The aim of this syllabus is to serve you as the first starting point from which to depart when designing their research. It is not a handbook and students need to develop their own understanding of the current academic views on a particular method and should never rely solely on the syllabus. A bibliography is included with works that allow you to begin mapping good methodological practices for each method.

Methods vs. Methodology

This syllabus deals both with methods and methodologies, words which in many texts are used somewhat interchangeably, but that have a clear distinction that you should be aware of in order to provide a sound reflection on your own methodology. Methods are the way research is conducted, the techniques that are used to gather the data needed to answer the research question. The methodology, in turn, is the lens through which the research is shaped, the data is understood and the discipline it draws from. Mackenzie and Knipe (2006) give a concise definition in their excellent discussion on research dilemmas:

The most common definitions suggest that methodology is the overall approach to research linked to the paradigm or theoretical framework while the method refers to systematic modes, procedures or tools used for collection and analysis of data.

Research can therefore - and in media studies it most often does - employ multiple different methods. See further below in the section on research design.

Researching and writing

For some students doing research starts when they start writing their paper, but conducting research and writing the article are iterative processes that are distinct yet closely intertwined. The written product should be the result of the research done, and research therefore necessarily precedes the writing process. The insights gained from research are then structured into a written argument that disentangles them from the researcher's other ideas and presents a streamlined argument to the reader based on the research conducted.

Writing itself however is also a powerful way to come to new insights as one structures ideas, sees new relations and identifies glaring omissions during the process of committing one's thoughts to paper. Often this will force the researcher to reconsider their argument, data, concepts or methods and go back to do some more research, which is the essence of what good research is about. You should however be aware that this iterative process of 'writing-researching' means that much of what was written early on needs to be changed or discarded along the way. Rigorous editing of the final product is often needed to present the reader with a legible article and researchers are often asked to 'kill their darlings' because observations they find interesting simply do not fit into the article as a whole.

Research design: The theory/object dynamic

Nanna Verhoeff

The analysis of objects, in relation to phenomena of our mediatized culture, is the heart of our discipline. Analysis is our primary methodology; the main principle of research design. What is analysis? It is not just a description or dissection of a phenomenon or object. The analysis focuses on a *question* about specific *object* in relation to a wider *phenomenon*, in the form of an inquiry into:

- the specificity of the object
- the theories and concepts by which we approach it, and
- related media phenomena.

These three levels are tied together by the main research question. A *case* entails therefore always a leading question - that is, a question about both object and concept. *Case study research* for media studies is the analysis of media objects designed around the focus on such questions. The research design, or methodology, of case studies specifies the relationship between object (in relation to the phenomenon) and concept (in relation to theory). The analysis aims to understand the relationship between them.

An analysis thus is also never a mere application of concepts or theory *onto* the object. Concepts or theory cannot be 'applied'; they are the lenses through which you look at your object in order to see things that remain unnoticed without the conceptual lenses. An analysis consists of a written account of the dynamic relationship or the feedback loop between object and concept. Only thus designed your research can be called a *case study*.

Case study research

Case studies can deploy different methods, and (hence) different sources that are gathered and analyzed. For example, a *textual analysis* of a game differs from the *discourse analysis* of that game in commercials, or the analysis of player activities during the game. In these three examples the object of study (a game) may be the same, but the case, the sources and methods of analysis differ.

What all good case studies share is a specification of the relationship between 1) object, 2) concept(s), and 3) sources. In each research product (a paper, a thesis, an article, for example) you have to be specific about your methodology. This entails a description of the way you approach your object in relation to a phenomenon, in relation to the concept(s) that are mobilized or questioned, and in relation to the sources you are going to use.

Where do we begin? With the theoretical concept or the object? Is the phenomenon where you start, of the conceptual questions about theory? The answer is simple: everything is possible as long as the elements are brought in relation to each other. The order does not matter: it is about the connections you make.

In a written account (paper or article) a linear description is given of what in essence is a map of relations. So let's look at the steps, the *what*, *why* and *how* that need to be made clear in your text. But note that the consecution of the steps in writing down your analysis is usually not the same as the consecution of doing the research.

1) *What*

A primary step in designing your case study is to articulate what *phenomena* you are investigating when looking at a specific object, or what phenomena your object exemplifies or contradicts. These phenomena can be larger or smaller. They can be specific technologies, interfaces, platforms, practices, or genres. They can also be more general phenomena, such as 'user participation' or 'algorithmic control', or more abstract phenomena, such as 'the ideal of communication', 'thinking in terms of progress in media historiography', or 'gendered constructions of participation'. The level on which we investigate media phenomena can differ in each research. The case study can be wider or smaller, more concrete or more abstract, starting with the object or with the phenomenon.

2) *Why*

A second step is to articulate which concepts (e.g. those used to understand similar phenomena) are challenged by the object. In other words: why this object and these concepts, what are the conceptual research questions raised by the object? Why is this important? Again, this does not involve the application of concepts but a critical interrogation of the implications and assumptions of the concepts involved, as related to the object and to other concepts. For example, such an interrogation can be guided by the question: how can aspects of what has been conceptualized as gamification be identified in the design of navigation interfaces?

3) *How*

A third step is to design the actual analysis. For this you first need to specify the sources (data, texts, academic literature) you are going to gather in order to shed light on your case. Account for which sources you select, and why: to which analytical questions do they connect? From this you derive your specific method, which of course also depends on your specific object of research. In any case your chosen method needs to be accounted for and specified: how is the method (e.g. [close reading](#), [frame analysis](#), discourse analysis, material object analysis) employed in the analysis of what sources (interviews, data, images, etc.) and how does it answer the analytical questions (e.g. 'how is power built-in the design of the object?', 'which negotiations can be identified between the actors that uphold the object?').

To summarize: your methodology is the design of the way in which your method(s) will deliver answers to (analytical/conceptual) questions about your object(s) in order to answer your main research question(s).

Example: The case of the Nintendo DS

A recurring focus in media studies is reflection on historical change, innovation, or transition in media culture. Defining new or changing media phenomena in the fast changing media landscape entails an inherently comparative perspective: what is specific about these phenomena and how are they different from other or earlier phenomena, manifested in different technologies, practices, or discourses. A comparative methodology reflects on these manifestations and analyzes them in order to gain insight in their specificity and significance as related to phenomena in comparison to other manifestations. This approach implies a historical positioning of the object in relation to other, mostly older objects.

The article 'Theoretical Consoles' (Verhoeff 2009) presents the case of the Nintendo DS by asking the question: how can we understand innovative gadgets like the Nintendo and what is its significance for media studies? The Nintendo is taken as an object of analysis, as example of a vast array of fast-changing, and temporarily innovative gadgets. But is also taken as an 'analytical object', as a theoretical concept that manifests itself in this specific embodied form, and from which new insightful concepts can be derived, in this case the concept of 'theoretical console'. The *what* of the study is the Nintendo DS as gadget. The *why* of the study, or main question is: How can the Nintendo DS (object) as temporarily innovative gadget (phenomenon) be significant as 'analytical object' (concept) in media studies. The *how* is the employed method of analysis: the comparison with other and older screen-based media in order to track down the specificity of the Nintendo DS as object. The sources used are varied (commercials, discourse in advertisements, reviews in popular press, the material screen-based object of the DS itself, games for the DS, and so on).

Further reading

Bal, Mieke. 2002. *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities a Rough Guide*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Boomen, van den, Marianne, Joost Raessens, An-Sophie Lehmann, Sybille Lammes, and Mirko Tobias Schäfer, ed. 2009. *Digital Material: Tracing New Media in Everyday Life and Technology*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.

<http://www.mtschaefer.net/media/uploads/docs/Digital-Material.PDF>.

Verhoeff, Nanna. 2009. 'Theoretical Consoles: Concepts for Gadget Analysis'. *Journal of Visual Culture* 8 (3): 279-298.

Literature review: Not a method but a prerequisite

Marianne van den Boomen

It can not be stressed enough that a [literature review](#) is *not* a method. Of course, you read literature, that is, you read all kinds of texts about your object of research, about the concepts and theories that are developed in the field of new media studies (or other relevant academic fields for your research), and about methodology. Such reading is a prerequisite for any research, but it is not a method as such for a thesis. You derive your methodology and your method(s) from these sources, by relating them to your object of study and your research question. You cannot write a thesis that consists of just a literature review.

A thesis starts with the introduction of your research object and the issues and problems that surround it, including already some references to what others in the field have claimed or proposed regarding these issues. Either already in the introduction chapter or in a dedicated chapter you provide a field overview: a critical description of the academic current state of affairs with regards to the chosen question or problem, based on relevant sources.

Primary, secondary, and tertiary sources

Relevant sources can be divided into primary, secondary, and tertiary sources. Primary literature consists of original work by authors who have developed theories and concepts or have conducted specific research (for example work by Foucault or McLuhan). Secondary sources consist of works that are an analysis, synthesis, and often a critique of such primary sources, for example an introduction to Foucault or McLuhan, or textbooks such as Lister et al. Tertiary resources consist of a synthesis of primary and secondary sources, such as dictionaries and encyclopedia, including Wikipedia.

Read as much as you can, to make yourself sensitive and acquainted with the field. Read all kinds of resources that are relevant to your study, primary, secondary and tertiary - but make sure your main body of texts is primary. Also, be careful how you use the different sources in your writing. Quote and refer always to original primary sources when you address concepts from these primary sources; don't quote Foucault or McLuhan from a secondary or tertiary source. You can quote secondary texts, but only if the author formulates a specific criticism on the primary source at stake. Do not quote or refer to a tertiary resource, and never ever list these in your bibliography. Use these tertiary resources to find your way to primary resources.

Reading = processing

Start reading as soon as you have a faint idea about your research; it sharpens your thoughts and your focus. However, reading is not just digesting and (hopefully) remembering what you have read. Reading texts involves processing texts:

- making notes and summaries
- jotting down your opinion or critique
- collecting and selecting relevant quotes (with page numbers for specific quotes or paraphrases)
- making schemes or mind maps of how and where specific sources fit in your work
- compiling bibliographical details.

For a good and thorough overview and instruction on writing a literature review, see Chris Hart. 1999. *Doing a Literature Review. Releasing the Social Science Research Imagination*, London: Sage.

Material Object Analysis

Marianne van den Boomen and Ann-Sophie Lehmann

Introduction

To grasp the heterogeneous implications of digital culture, concrete media objects as such can be the primary object of study. We propose to call this type of research *material object analysis*. While such an analysis can be made of any given object, this approach focuses on *media objects*. It aims to track down the built-in affordances, restrictions, and codifications in specific media objects. Such objects are technological artifacts that can take the form of

- hardware (e.g. tablet, mouse, smart phone, touch screen, Google Goggles)
- software (e.g. Photoshop, Gephi, Google's PageRank algorithm)
- representations (e.g. YouTube movies, network graphs, visual interfaces, MRI scans, computer icons, blog posts).

Most media objects we deal with in everyday life are hybrid assemblages of several hardware, software and representational objects. They are complex. Think of platforms (such as Facebook or Twitter, but also older forms such as IRC channels and Usenet groups), websites (Reddit, 4chan), webservices (Dropbox, Gmail), apps and applications (Whatsapp, Instagram, Self Tracking apps) as well as whole genres (blogs, games, chatrooms).

Such media objects are the primary object of investigation when researched in depth (a *case study* of the object, which includes its history, business model, controversies, design, affordances, and appropriation) or when compared to other media objects (a *comparative analysis* that systematically compares specific features of two or more media objects). Media objects are the secondary object of study when used as examples to illustrate how particular phenomena materialize. Media object analysis can also be employed as a preliminary heuristic device in order to determine which questions you want to pose to your object, how you want to tackle the phenomenon you are interested in, and which hypotheses you can formulate.

Situating material object analysis

In any case objects in this approach are explicitly analyzed as concrete *material* things, which implies that they have to be delineated, described, and analyzed as such. In that regard material object analysis differs from textual analysis and discourse analysis. Though object analyses are often combined with these other forms of analysis, the distinctions have to be kept in mind and should be accounted for. They are different methodologies, that is, they delineate the object of study differently, they rely on different methods, theoretical frameworks and concepts, and they raise and consequently answer different questions. Roughly the differences can be sketched as follows.

Textual analysis

- *Object*: a singular media text or a corpus of media texts (print or screen text, but also images and sounds can be analyzed as 'media texts', see Gillespie and Toynbee 2006)
- *Theory*: semiotics, hermeneutics, coding/decoding, framing, genre theory
- *Concepts*: signs, representation, narrative/plot, montage, intertextuality
- *Methods*: narrative analysis, genre analysis, quantitative content analysis
- *Questions*: meaning making, interpretation, codification, ideology, reproduction, persuasion, instruction, propaganda

Discourse analysis (1 = linguistic discourse analysis 2 = social/critical discourse analysis, see also the chapter by Joost Raessens in this syllabus, and Renkema 2009)

- *Object*: a corpus of text documents (1. Homogeneous, selection based on a specific genre or type; 2. Heterogeneous, selection based on a specific issue, discursive field or historical period)
- *Theory 1*: linguistics, rhetorics, cognitive psychology, communication theory, speech act theory
Theory 2: media archaeology, Foucauldian genealogy, critical theory, gender theory, post-colonial theory
- *Concepts 1*: style, genre, communication modes, interaction, speech acts
Concepts 2: power/knowledge, discipline, subject formation, ideology, social inequality, public sphere
- *Methods*: content analysis (quantitative), coding frames (qualitative, see Deacon et al., 1999), archive research
- *Questions 1*: communication styles, persuasion, effectivity
Questions 2: social diffusion and construction of ideas, political economy, power, control, ideology, memes

Material object analysis

- *Object*: a simple or complex material 'thing' (which may be a specific textual thing, but not a discourse)
- *Theory*: affordance theory (Gibson 1977, Norman 1999) Actor-Network Theory, material semiotics, thing theory (Brown 2001), design theory
- *Concepts*: affordance, design, black boxes, intermediaries/actors, translation/migration, material metaphors, material culture, embodiment, materiality/materials (Van den Boomen et al. 2009, Ingold 2007)
- *Methods*: observation, description, testing/tinkering, empirical experiment
- *Questions*: how are things made/maintained/negotiated, what do they afford, what are the built-in assumptions about usage, how do they influence, create, change actions and interactions, how do they innovate, transform, and maintain built-in control etc.

Object description, analysis and reconstruction

In material media objects, whether simple or complex, two basic levels of materiality can be distinguished and described:

- *technology* (material construction/mechanism, hardware, software, network infrastructure)
- *representation* (with material modalities such as text, image, or sound, and with material semiotic and communicative effects)

This division is helpful to start the analysis, however, it is crucial to realize that while we need to take media objects apart and divide them into categories in order to analyze them, the reason to do so is to understand how these categories are interrelated and how precisely these entanglements create affordances and meaning. After all, media objects are technological-representational 'knots'. Analysis is always disentanglement and dissection, but it cannot end there. What is needed after dissection is a reconstruction that accounts for the *relations* between the elements, relations that matter. The approach to description and analysis should therefore be seen as a toolbox that allows for a dissection of the object at hand but also allows for putting it together again (Knorr-Cetina and Amman 1990, Hodder 2013).

Example To illustrate that complexity lets have a seemingly simple example of a media object most of us encounter every day: a whatsapp message. We can only get such a message if we have the app (software technology), a smartphone (hardware technology) and a wireless Internet connection (network technology). The message announces itself though a sound and a push notification on the screen and a number at the corner of the app icon (representation: sound, image, number, text). At least if I allow the app to do so, I can change the ways of announcement in the settings (software and hardware technology). The message itself can consist of text, icons, pictures, film and sound (representation). It is the specific combination and interrelations of these aspects that produces specific meanings and affordances, which have to be written down in a relational reconstruction.

In the next paragraphs the levels of description, analysis and reconstruction are described by providing examples of questions that can be answered. Note that these questions are examples, not a checklist! Each specific media object requires its own set of adequate questions to be answered - constructing and selecting the right questions is also part of your research.

A. Object description

Form and material: delineate the object, describe its form and materials at first sight. Is it primarily hardware or software, or a mix? Is it stable or transitory/transformative? Mobile or immobile? Main usage? By whom, in what context?

B. Representation analysis

Main questions here are: What type of representations does the object produce/use/process? How do they relate to each other? Roughly three types of representation can be distinguished.

Textual representations: What kinds of text does the media object consist of? What kind of texts does it produce, process or include? Examples: code numbers at a very basic level, menus on webpages, text messages, Terms of Service, privacy disclaimers, blog comments. What do the texts communicate, what is their goal? (Here object analysis may imply textual analysis - depending on the particular media object at stake it may be included in the material object analysis).

Visual representation: What kinds of images does the media object consist of? What kinds of images does it produce or process? Examples of modalities: graphic, photographic, photo-graphic hybrids, film, animation, hybrids of film and animation, data visualizations, body scan images (X-ray, MRI, PET). How are images changed by the media object (filters)? How do images move through networks and how do they get modified in that process? (uploading to social network sites, tagging, facial recognition, metadata). What do they depict, what are they supposed to mean/signify, for whom?

Interface representation: A user interface is usually a combination of text, images and algorithms. An interface analysis consists of a comprehensive inventory of elements and functions. Contrary to common usability analyses, material object analyses focus on the subtle ways of channeling user activities by stimulating certain activities and averting others. Questions then are: What elements can be distinguished at the interface (textual, graphical, sound, movement etc.)? What are their respective functions (navigation, operation, interaction, ranking, data generation etc.)? What types of usage do they afford, what types do they restrict or prohibit?

After having determined the types of texts, images or interface elements, the next question is how they have been *made* (usually a combination of human and non-human processing), how they create *meaning* (for whom, by which associations - this usually involves multiple levels), and how they *migrate* to other domains (e.g. labor organization, commodity market, class room, medical practice). In some cases, for instance when your research question concerns how MRI technologies affect medical practice or how Facebook's Like button transforms the web these questions already lead to a full-fledged research. But also in these cases the question of making and migration should be connected to the next level of analysis: technical analysis.

C. Technical analysis

Main questions here are: by what types of mechanism and material is the object constructed? What hardware, software, and network elements can be distinguished (usually multiple levels)? How do they work, what are their respective functions? What is directly visible of the working, what can be traced down, what can only be inferred, what remains blackboxed?

After describing the mechanism, an analysis in terms of *affordances* and *design* (Schäfer 2011) is needed. Which affordances can be identified? To what extent are these affordances are inherent to

the materiality of the object, and to what extent are they built-in by design decisions? What is 'dis-afforded', which invisible design features can be identified that channel user activities (filters, website blockers)? What can be identified as back-end politics? And finally, how does the technical materiality relate to the representations, and hence to meaning making?

Having read this, you may have gotten the impression that the material analysis of a media object is a lot of work. It is indeed, and as mentioned above, may very well turn into a full-fledged research onto itself. But also if an object and its technologies and representations are not your central focus, grounding your question in the materiality of media objects will generally help you to clarify your research question and to select the methods you need in order to develop answers.

General resources

- Deacon, David, Michael Pickering, Peter Golding, and Graham Murdock. 1999. *Researching Communications: A Practical Guide to Methods in Media and Cultural Analysis*. London: Arnold.
- Gillespie, Marie, and Jason Toynbee. 2006. *Analysing Media Texts*. Maidenhead: McGraw-Hill.
- McKee, Alan. 2001. 'A Beginner's Guide to Textual Analysis'. *Metro Magazine: Media & Education* (127/128): 138-149. <http://eprints.qut.edu.au/41993/2/41993.pdf>
- McKee, Alan. 2003. *Textual Analysis: A Beginner's Guide*. London: Sage.

Object-oriented resources

- Brown, Bill. 2001. 'Thing Theory'. *Critical Inquiry* 28 (1): 1-22.
- Candlin, Fiona, and Raiford Guins. 2009. *The Object Reader*. London: Routledge.
- Gillespie, Tarleton, Pablo J. Boczkowski and Kirsten A. Foot (eds.) 2014. *Media Technologies: Essays on Communication, Materiality, and Society*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press. (UBU)
- Ingold, Tim. 2007. 'Materials against Materiality'. *Archaeological Dialogues* 14 (1): 1-16.
- Knorr-Cetina, Karin and Klaus Amman. 1990. 'Image Dissection in Natural Scientific Inquiry'. *Science, Technology & Human Values* 15: 259-283.
- Kroes, Peter. 2006. 'Coherence of structural and functional descriptions of technical artifacts'. *Studies In History and Philosophy of Science* 37 (1): 137-151.
- Latour, Bruno. 2005. *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. (UBU, electronic resource)
- Norman, Donald A. 1999. 'Affordance, Conventions, and Design'. *Interactions* 6 (3): 38-43.

Examples of object analysis

- Boomen, Marianne van den. 2008. 'Interfacing by Iconic Metaphors'. *Configurations* 16 (1): 33-55.
- Gerlitz, Carolin, and Anne Helmond. 2013. 'The Like Economy: Social Buttons and the Data-Intensive Web'. *New Media & Society* 15 (8): 1348-65.
- Lehmann, Ann-Sophie. 2012. 'Taking the Lid of the Utah Teapot. The Materials of Computer Graphics'. *Zeitschrift für Medien und Kulturforschung* 1: 157-172.
http://www.ann-sophielehmann.nl/content/docs/lehmann_teapot_zmk12012.pdf

Discourse and Frame Analysis

The chapter on discourse and frame analysis is forthcoming and will be incorporated in the next version of this reader. For your benefit a selection of sources is already included that allow you to gain a better understanding of how to do a proper discourse analysis.

- Baxter, Leslie A., and Earl R. Babbie. 2003. *The Basics of Communication Research*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning.
- Deacon, David, Michael Pickering, Peter Golding, and Graham Murdock. 1999. *Researching Communications: A Practical Guide to Methods in Media and Cultural Analysis*. London: Arnold.
- Elsaesser, Thomas, and Warren Buckland. 2002. *Studying Contemporary American Film: A Guide to Movie Analysis*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Gee, James Paul. 2004. 'Discourse Analysis: What Makes It Critical'. *An Introduction to Critical Discourse Analysis in Education*, edited by Rebecca Rogers, 19-50. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associate Publishers.
- Jørgensen, Marianne W., and Louise J. Phillips. 2002. *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method*. London: Sage.
- Silverman, David. 2013. *Doing Qualitative Research: A Practical Handbook*. London: Sage.
- Raessens, Joost. 2010. 'A Taste of Life as a Refugee: How Serious Games Frame'. In *Changes in Museum Practice. New media, Refugees and Participation*, edited by Hanne-Lovise Skartveit and Katherine J. Goodnow, 94-105. New York: Berghahn Books.
- Scheufele, Dietram A., and David Tewksbury. 2007. 'Framing, Agenda Setting, and Priming: The Evolution of Three Media Effects Models'. *Journal of Communication* 57 (1), 9-20.

Critical Data Analysis

The chapter on critical data analysis is forthcoming and will be incorporated in the next version of this reader.

Interviews and Focus Groups

Nicolle Lamerichs

Face-to-face interviews are a popular form of social research. The interviewer creates an interview schedule for the interview. An interview depends greatly on preparation. Depending on the nature of the interview, and the preferences of the interviewer, the dialogue may be structured. In this case, the questions are thought of in advance and ordered in a certain logical way. Interviews can also be semi-structured by means of a topic list or even informal.

In marketing research and other domains, structured interviews are increasingly done as a group interviewing method or “focus groups”. The challenge is that interviewees are in a group and also adopt group roles. Some may feel insecure and speak less, others will be dominant. It is up to you as an interviewer to also act as a moderator. That can be a daunting job. The upside of this method is that you can contrast different opinions. Interviewees can follow up on each other and comment. In the ideal case, they feel comfortable and more ideas and information will flow out of this conversation.

Sampling respondents, transcribing and coding are necessary steps in this research process. Do not underestimate any of these steps and make sure that they follow up on your research questions and scope. In terms of sampling, it is important to consider, for instance, where you will find your respondents and whether you want them to recommend others by means of “snowballing”. Consider your sample often. Ask yourself whether you strive for “maximum variation sampling” in which you have heterogeneous sets of subjects, or whether you strive for a small, delineated sample. For instance, sampling for gender, age and ethnicity criteria may be relevant in some cases, but in other cases you may want to give a full overview of a population. In many cases, such maximum variation is not feasible though since you need to create a coherent sample. Your claims will be limited by your target group then (for instance, Dutch female fans in their twenties).

Realize that for our MA you will commonly not investigate a particular representative group. Most of the time, you will interview certain experts or representative but singular users. You have a very different goal than investigating a certain population and often use an interview not as core data, but as additional information.

General tips

Interviews come with certain challenges and questions. To overcome them, consider this:

- Always record a conversation and always *ask* to record a conversation. Your respondents need to give permission to quote
- Prepare for the interview. Ask yourself: Do I want a fixed set of questions or topics (a topic list) or will I engage in a more liberal dialogue with respondents?
- Think about ethics. You have a responsibility towards your research subjects. Take anonymity, for instance. Always ask respondents for their preference – it is also their choice

and they have the right to be anonymous. Think about whether they can be retraced via your article and whether there are means to make them less traceable, if they so wish.

- Consider and read up on the art of interviewing. Do not steer your interviewees. Try to create a pleasant atmosphere for them. Explain to them that their opinion is highly valued. Be committed and confident. Also consider the place where you are holding the interview. A bar may be crowded, but can also be a comfortable environment. A university room may be quiet, but also intimidating.

Coding

Practically, you can transcribe and decode in any type of software or tool, even pen and paper. Listening to your tape recorder, while typing in Word, can be helpful. You may even find that coding in Word is easy by using different colors and the remark button. Coding manually, by printing your files and coloring specific lines with markers, is perfectly valid, but the categories will be harder to change and your files can get messy fast. Coding is an important part of your analysis. Keep it clean, simple and clear. Bear in mind that your categories, after reading and analyzing the interviews, will probably change. Therefore, if you are comfortable with learning new software, it is best to code digitally.

These tips are mostly written with face-to-face interviews in mind. E-mail interviews, Skype interviews and telephone interviews raise fully different questions. If you did not have much interview training, face-to-face is highly recommended. Please bear in mind that a written interview per mail has a fully different status because there is no dialogue with the interviewer. In most cases, it is best to treat this extra information or a source, rather than core data.

Software

Since interviews are a common practice in many jobs, it should not surprise you that there are many programs that support this. I recommend experimenting with freeware and acquainting yourself with the latest trends and tips. If you are doing interviews via Skype, please consider recording tools such as *Skype Recorder*.

Express Scribe: This is a free and easy to use tool that allows you to transcribe your data easily and take notes

Atlas: This needs to be purchased, but has sophisticated features that allow you to categorize and group your data

Literature:

I have included two handbooks that are similar in scope. I am particularly fond of Theresa Baker's handbook, who gives a broad overview of different qualitative methods and their challenges. I recommend not only reading about the basic methods (part 3 of the book) but paying special

attention to the coding section (part four). I have also included an article of mine that relies heavily on interview data. This may help you understand not only what an interview is, but also how you can analyze interview quotes as core data in your argument. Inform yourself and read more works of other people who used these methods to inspire yourself.

Baker, Therese L. 1998. *Doing Social Research*. Boston: McGraw-Hill.

Baxter, Leslie A., and Earl R. Babbie. 2003. *The Basics of Communication Research*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning.

Lamerichs, Nicolle. 2012. 'Holmes Abroad: Dutch Fans Interpret the Famous Detective', in *Sherlock and Transmedia Fandom: Essays on the BBC Series*, edited by Louisa Ellen Stein and Kristina Busse, 179-195. Jefferson: McFarland.

Silverman, David. 2013. *Doing Qualitative Research: A Practical Handbook*. London: Sage.

Ethnography in media research

Michiel de Lange

Introduction

Ethnography originated in nineteenth-century Western anthropology and provided descriptive accounts of (mostly non-western) communities or cultures. Ethnography, as the study of people in their natural habitat, often takes place during a period of fieldwork research in which the researcher is 'initiated' in another culture and way of life.

Ethnography departs from the epistemological tenet that people's thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors are not subject to universal laws (*erklären*) but instead are situation-specific and symbolic, and can therefore only be approached through interpretation (*verstehen*). Its methodology is exploratory and inductive rather than positivistic (testing/validating a hypothesis by empirical evidence and logical deduction) or naturalistic (like in biology with an invisible observer who does not influence the field). Often, ethnographers begin with little preconceived theory and concepts, as these are supposed to emerge from the research itself (a specific methodology called [grounded theory](#))

Ethnographers are sensitive to issues like otherness, friction and conflict, the subjectivity of the researcher and the researched 'object', symbolic aspects of meaning and interpretation, the layered and interconnected qualities of reality (see also the methodology called [thick description](#)). They make this sensitivity productive to gain knowledge about other cultures. A crucial pair of notions is *emic* and *etic*, which refers respectively to an insiders view (notions people themselves use to explain their thoughts, beliefs, behavior, culture, etc.) and an outsiders view (framed by academic or professional concepts). Together they constitute a more meaningful portrayal of a culture than either one alone. Being a stranger to a group or culture thus is an asset., yet in reporting it is essential that people's own concepts and voices can be heard.

Participant observation

Doing ethnography involves documentation and interpretation of data gathered during fieldwork. Ethnography encompasses a variety of methods, notably *participant observation*. As the term suggests, it alternates between immersing oneself in a culture by 'doing what they do' and distancing oneself in order to reflect on mutual otherness. Participant observation is typically done in everyday contexts, during prolonged periods of time, unstructured (not preplanned). It focuses on practices more than on 'texts' (cultural output/objects), and prioritizes depth over width (specific over general).

In practice ethnographic research is iterative but in any case the following steps have a place in this process:

1. Preparing for fieldwork, defining the field, setting a timeframe.
2. Gaining entry to the field, encountering the other.

3. Doing the fieldwork involves:

* Data collection and creation. Data may pre-exist, emerge from interactions, or be generated oneself. Data may be gathered from oral sources (listening in, participating, interviewing) and from written texts, but also generated by studying artifacts, drawing maps, and so on. Typically, context is given much attention to allow 'webs of meaning' to emerge: who says or does what, how, when, where, who and what objects are present?

* Selection. What matters, what not? Use a funnel model that starts broad and ends more specific.

* Ordering. Keep a diary (from documenting facts to reflective auto-ethnography), make notes, photos, film, (mental) maps, maintain a database, etc.

* Analysis. Revisit data during the fieldwork, assess veracity (people lie, cheat, try to get things done from you).

* Reflection. What (*emic*) notions emerge from the data? Data (especially when generated) are not neutral but become political actors (for example kinship relations when mapped may become a power tool for institutions). Your subjectivity shapes the data and reflections. What failures have you met? How can these be turned into productive insights?

4. Testing. [Triangulate](#) by using other methods (for example interviews) to check validity of findings.

5. Revisit. What more is needed? Back to step 2 until you reach a saturation point.

6. Returning. Separation and seeing one's own culture through new eyes can be made productive too.

7. Writing the report. This involves making decisions about representation. What notions are central and whose are those? Who does the talking, are the research subjects truly *subjects* in that they have a voice? How is the ethnographer present in the report? What are the qualities of the media used like text, film, online, and so on?

Interviewing

Other ethnographic methods - or rather techniques - involve doing interviews, keeping diaries, [content analysis](#) of a variety of sources and objects, and even experiments. Interviews in ethnography are mostly unstructured or semi-structured. Unstructured interviewing is closest to having a long and deep conversation, while semi-structured interviewing use a pre-established set of questions. Interviews are always goal-oriented; mere dialogue is not interviewing.

New media ethnography

When using ethnography in studying (digital) media additional considerations arise. In online ethnography how does one enter a culture? Data gathering is different in quantity and quality, and

implies different ways to obtain data. Also, the ethics of informed consent is difficult to maintain online (Kozinets 2010, 5).

Doing new media ethnography raises questions about concepts such as places, situations, communities, artifacts, cultures and other typical units of analysis in ethnography. As 'cyberspace' has become very diverse, can it still be called 'a culture'? How can one separate between online/offline and define clearcut situations with everyone using mobile media? Time becomes a prominent factor. Mediated and urban cultures are often made up of very fleeting types of arrangements (e.g. networked publics, smart mobs) and cultural expressions (e.g. memes, virals). One cannot assume stable tight-knit communities.

Digital technologies not only form objects of study; they are also used as tools in a variety of [digital methods](#). This ranges from using media to engage with others, to capturing and aggregating data, and performing analysis.

Reflections and possible pitfalls

If you intend to use this method there are some point you should consider and explicitly reflect on when needed.

- * Our globalized, mobile and mediatized world makes studying people in their natural habitat more difficult. What is 'natural'? What is this 'habitat'? What is the definition of '(a) people' or 'community'?
- * How did you enter and how did gain trust, how did you engage with people?
- * What balance have you struck between observation (the naturalistic ideal of being an invisible fly on the wall) and participation (going native, total immersion)?
- * What balance have you struck between *emic* (folk categories and framing) and *etic* (outsider views, mostly academic/professional) vocabularies and views?
- * Whose voices are you presenting, and whose not? Do you allow your subjects to be true subjects and to speak for themselves?
- * What has been your own subject position and personal bias? How has your presence in the field shaped findings and outcomes?

Recommended literature

Methodology handbooks

Boellstorff, Tom. 2012. *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: A Handbook of Method*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Hammersley, Martyn, and Paul Atkinson. 2007. *Ethnography: Principles in Practice*. London: Routledge. [Classic text book about ethnographic methods. Not much attention for the role of

digital media, although the 3rd edition pays some attention to digital spaces, artifacts, and culture.]

Hine, Christine, ed. 2005. *Virtual Methods: Issues in Social Research on the Internet*. New York: Berg.
Kozinets, Robert V. 2010. *Netnography : Ethnographic Research in the Age of the Internet*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Examples of ethnography in media studies

Boellstorff, Tom. 2008. *Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Horst, Heather A., and Daniel Miller. 2006. *The Cell Phone: An Anthropology of Communication*. New York: Berg.

Miller, Daniel, and Don Slater. 2000. *The Internet: An Ethnographic Approach*. New York: Berg.

Media Archaeology

Imar de Vries

While media studies has appropriated a range of methods from other academic fields – images are subjected to semiotic analysis and texts are analyzed using content analysis and discourse analysis, whilst audiences are studied using both qualitative and quantitative methods, from ethnographic observation, open-questionnaires and interviews to more formal, structured questionnaires and interviews – it remains an open question whether there is something that could be called an ‘in-house’ methodology, a way of gathering and interpreting data that is *specific* to the field of media studies.

This addition to the Media Studies method reader contends that, if there is one label that could be considered describing best what the Utrecht school of Media and Culture Studies does and produces, it would be media archaeology. Scholars working in this field analyse the role of (new) media in shaping culture and society, and they aim to do so historically, comparatively, and theoretically. Now, as a research discipline, media archaeology is at present still fairly heterogeneous and knows no *single* defining approach or method in studying its objects, but what it does give us is the notion that the media and media phenomena of today are by definition always already historically contextualised and that they, as a consequence, should be studied synchronically and diachronically in relation to other, older, alternative, and even imagined media and media phenomena. In fact, doing cultural studies without incorporating at least a significant historical perspective would, says Michael Pickering, risk becoming “fixated with stridently immediate concerns and insistently new issues, in a faddishness and obsession with trend-spotting that runs the danger of mimicking what it attempts to track” (2008: 193-194).¹

According to Jussi Parikka, one of the leading figures today in defining and shaping the field, ‘media archaeology’ knows multiple inspirations, ranging from the writings of Michel Foucault, Walter Benjamin, Friedrich Kittler, Siegfried Zielinski, and Marshall McLuhan amongst others (2012: 5-6). Most visibly, the term came to the fore in the 1980s in the wake of the New Film History movement, which vehemently opposed the “traditional historians’” idea that early 20th-century film was to be called ‘primitive’ and that late 20th-century film was the result of multiple and improving ‘evolutionary’ steps.² What media archaeology takes from these authors and more culturally-informed views on history is the idea that an analysis of media technology should take into account that every medium, discursively and materially, is, as Vivian Sobchack notes, a manifestation of a

¹ Bonnie Brennen as well contends that cultural studies should move away from myopic “textism” and benefit from historical knowledge, without falling into the “traditional historians’” pitfall of myopic “factism” (Brennen 2013).

² Brennen pits “traditional historians” against “cultural historians”, contending that the former favor linear and/or isolated views on history, while the latter take into account the many cultural layers that give several relational meanings to historical events. Although this opposition nowadays does not really exist anymore within the field of History, it helps us to understand the dangers of supposing that history is a single sequential flow of events. Also see Marvin (1988), Gunning (1989), Elsaesser (2004), and Strauven (2006).

tension between being here and always having been there, between making present and bringing forth, between contingency and transhistorical continuity; in media technologies “the presence of the past emerges in the here and now” (2011: 324-326).

To be able to say something about how new media are presented as logical progressions of older media, and at the same time are always ‘old’ themselves in terms of the deeply ingrained desires they aim to fulfill, media archaeologists should turn to Foucault, who aimed to uncover ruptures and discontinuities within discursively upheld linear and progressive historical time lines, and to Erkki Huhtamo, who on the one hand sides with Foucault in dismissing linearity but on the other is adamant that media history knows what he calls *topoi*, “cyclically recurring elements and motives underlying and guiding the development of media culture”, which do suggest a certain historical continuity (Huhtamo 1997). Media archaeology for Huhtamo is about

the “excavation” of the ways in which these discursive traditions and formulations have been “imprinted” on specific media machines and systems in different historical contexts, contributing to their identity in terms of socially and ideologically specific webs of signification. This kind of approach emphasizes cyclical rather than chronological development, recurrence rather than unique innovation. In doing so it runs counter to the customary way of thinking about technoculture in terms of constant progress, proceeding from one technological breakthrough to another, and making earlier machines and applications obsolete along the way. (ibid.)

Therefore, to do media archaeology means to do both cultural-historical and discursive research, to perform oral history³ or to delve into archives⁴ to find long-forgotten and/or imagined media and media representations, and to then juxtapose those alternative, forgotten or “deja vu” discourses with the ones we know from today, in order to find and explain the similarities in what seemed different (and the differences in what seemed similar).⁵ Doing media archaeology will get your hands dirty and will make you sweat: it is often about unearthing primary sources, not about rehashing secondary sources; it is about meticulously describing the social, cultural, political, economical, and technological contexts of certain discourses and resisting the urge to take shortcuts; it is about daring to incorporate multi-disciplinarity into your work instead of sticking to safe bets.

One of the best examples of a media-archaeological article is William Boddy’s “Archeologies of electronic vision and the gendered spectator”, which he starts out by noticing that discussions on Virtual Reality are (at the time of writing), still mostly about imaginary machines, and mostly contain “fantasies of (masculine) agency and power” (1994: 107). In order to explain and analyse this typical

³ See University of North Carolina’s excellent primer on oral history at <http://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/oral-history/>.

⁴ See Foucault (1972).

⁵ Also see Frank Kessler’s work on the “dispositif”, with which media history can not only be studied to find its “genealogy, underlying continuity, structural equivalence, etc”, but also “to stress differences among media dispositifs rather than similarities, or to distinguish different dispositifs underlying the apparent ‘identity’ of a given medium” (Kessler, 2007).

VR discourse, Boddy sets out to find and historically “trace the genealogy of powerful ideas which still shape the reception of contemporary electronic vision systems” (ibid.: 108). Believing that the roots of these powerful ideas lie in the rise of radio broadcasting in the United States of the 1920s, Boddy then proceeds to discursively analyse many primary sources from that time, and is able to argue that early radio, because of its affordance of tinkering, was seen as an apparatus that would turn boys into men. When radio got turned into a ‘passive’ domestic appliance by commercial companies and television was modeled after the radio, Boddy shows us, these devices came to be seen as emasculating. This observation, only made possible via careful historical discursive analysis, then enables Boddy to explain why VR discourse has taken on the very specific and gendered form we see today.

The biggest pitfalls of media archaeology are, in no particular order:

- wanting to say something about the now by looking back to the past, and then ending up writing a very linear ‘then this, then that’ story that does not even illuminate our knowledge about the present;
- projecting present-day terms, concepts and ideas onto past discourses, events, and phenomena without taking into account the inherent dangers of thereby already implying linearity and continuity;
- thinking that media archaeology is only about discourse (and, even worse, only about the ‘real’ or ‘actual’ and not the ‘imaginary’), while most media archaeologists would agree that materiality matters;
- putting in some obligatory references to Foucault and Huhtamo, citing “discontinuities” and “discourses” and “topoi”, without actually explaining what their contributions mean for your own research question, or how they should be positioned within the dynamic field of media archaeology.⁶

Literature, Handbooks & Recommended Reading

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⁶ For a thorough discussion of this pitfall, see Zwaan (2014).

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Play as a method

René Glas

The field of [game studies](#) is highly interdisciplinary, with a wide range of academic perspectives, employing many different methodologies, to study (digital) games, play, players and culture. For comprehensive overviews of both the game studies field as well as common methodologies, see the handbooks by Mäyrä 2008, and Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al. 2013. The humanities typically - but not exclusively - focus on (post-)structuralist game analysis or ontological analysis of games and play. Methodologies from media and cultural studies, such as various forms of [textual analysis](#) and [discourse analysis](#), are often applied (see elsewhere in this reader). Focusing only on the structural elements of a game, like the rules, puts a researcher in danger of ignoring the fact that games require *play* to come into being and that play does not always abide to the rules set by a game's design (Malaby 2007, Sicart 2011). To fully comprehend games and play, play itself should be part of the research methods chosen.

Students who engage in the study of games (or other forms of playful media) should therefore take the following into account.

In order to gain knowledge about and truly understand games, we should play them. This sounds as a given, but it is important to think about the role play has in the hermeneutic inquiry which underpins research. There is, as one would expect, no definite way to play a game. Games are vastly diverse in form and content, which means the way to play them varies too.

Additionally, game elements are increasingly used outside of 'traditional' games to offer playful or game-like experiences (gamification, serious/applied games, pervasive games). The question is, however, how far does one need to go in order to gain knowledge about and understand a particular game or game-like media form?

Depending on the research question or topic, Aarseth lists several player strata in game analysis (2003, 6):

- Superficial play (trying the game for a few minutes to get a basic feel for it)
- Light play (learning enough to make meaningful progress through a game)
- Partial completion (play towards certain goals)
- Total completion (finish a game at least once)
- Repeated play (trying different ways to play and finish a game)
- Expert play (excel in multi-player games too)
- Innovative play (inventing new strategies and ways to play a game).

Play as a method is not a matter of picking one of these strata as an approach but understanding that playing a game superficially yields other types of knowledge and understandings about a game than expert or innovative types of play. Here, the expertise in playing a game is similar to that of hardcore

players or users themselves. Ask yourself what level of experience with a game you need in order to answer your research question and aim to achieve at least that level. In general, playing (or having played) a wide range of games through various forms of play greatly enhances a researcher's ludoliteracy (Zagal 2010).

When playing analytically rather than leisurely, you should not just think about the amount of time you need to invest in play, but also on what to focus on while doing so. As Mäyrä points out, depending on your research focus it is good to differentiate between structural gameplay analysis, focusing on rules and interaction, or thematic analysis of games, focusing on the representational aspects of a game (Mäyrä 2008, 165-166). The focus can also be on social/community aspects of play, which might require analytical play to lean towards participant observation and other ethnographic techniques (Boellstorff 2006). As one would expect, to understand the social dimensions of play a superficial approach is not sufficient. It requires active engagement in both play and community activities over a longer period of time (Taylor 2006, Pearce and Artemesia 2009, Glas 2012). Play in such a case provides access to and insight in the participatory fan culture in and around a game. In all cases, taking notes and screenshots, recording video of play or in other ways logging play activity while playing analytically is recommended.

When you play games analytically, you should be reflexive of your own status as a player/researcher and understand the situatedness of play, both of which might impact your analysis (Lammes, 2007). Being a gamer, for instance, might sound beneficial (you start your research with a high degree of ludoliteracy) but it is important to keep critical distance from your research topic. Related to the matter of the situatedness of play is the distinction between a more formalist approach to studying games and situated approach. The first focuses primarily on games as cultural objects, while the latter argues that we cannot understand games without close attention to social, situated practices of play (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al. 2013). Depending on the research question and topic chosen, explaining how your research, and your role as a player/researcher, fits in such discussion should be part of your methodological reflection.

In terms of research ethics, cheating should not be seen as a way to circumvent regular play (Aarseth 2003) but depending on your research question or topic, it might be necessary to actively deviate from the intended play design of a game. When done reflexively, cheating or other forms of unorthodox play can be employed to identify aspect of games and play otherwise hidden (Kücklich 2007) or to better understand forms of deviance players engage in and the way this shapes the play experience (Glas 2012). Ask yourself what you want to investigate and what kind of play allows you do to do so.

Keep in mind though that, as Mäyrä puts it 'playing games is an essential part of being a scholar in game studies, but it should be combined with a selective and thoughtful use of other sources of information' (Mäyrä 2008, 167). As such, it is a methodological approach which is usually employed next to, not instead of, other approaches.

Further reading

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