Streaming Production Cultures: A Research Roadmap

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Abstract

This article responds to recent scholarly debates about the problems of generating empirical data on streaming production cultures. Our proposed roadmap offers strategies to navigate the industry secrecy, barriers to access, and unequal power dynamics that often impede production research. Drawing on combined insights from fifty interviews, we share best practices and dispel myths around accessing screen workers and other industry professionals. The article especially focuses on our experiences from conducting interviews, but we also provide ideas for collecting and synthesizing other forms of empirical data. The resulting roadmap offers an innovative approach to conducting research in a complex and opaque streaming environment.

Keywords: *Qualitative Methods, Streaming Production Cultures, Production Studies, Interviews, Interface Ethnography.*

Introduction

Breaking into the screen industry is difficult, also for researchers. As US-based global streamers solidify their position as major commissioners and producers of content around the world, they transform the dynamics of screen production and consequently production research. Crucial breaks from the legacy screen industry include the algorithmic curation of streaming content, limited access to streaming data, global distribution, and a loss of

intellectual property (IP) rights and residuals for creators. Although production for global streaming services has been ongoing for over a decade, streaming production studies is still an emerging field. This is partly because such research requires access to proprietary information typically restricted by nondisclosure agreements (NDAs) in a context where power asymmetries between producers and distributors take new forms.[2]

In this article, we draw from and contribute to scholarly discussions around research in an era of streaming, platforms, and algorithmic culture.[3] Our methodological intervention is based on combined learnings from research conducted separately by Daphne Rena Idiz and Nina Vindum Rasmussen in the European context.[4] These studies span fifty interviews in twelve countries,[5] as well as ethnographic observations of industry events. Our projects explore how streaming services influence creative decision-making, the strategies screen workers use to navigate and negotiate their working conditions, and the power dynamics between streaming services and screen workers. The resulting roadmap is therefore well-placed to support researchers in answering similar or related research questions, offering practical strategies for investigating the impact of streaming on production work and industry structures. While we root our findings in the specific context of the screen industry, elements of our proposed roadmap can be extended to other areas of cultural production.

We build on Caldwell's (2008) foundational concept of "production cultures," which positions production studies as research that engages with "the cultural practices and belief systems of film/video production workers."[6] Our approach is tailored to what we call "streaming production cultures," defined as the cultural practices and belief systems of screen workers (both above- and below-the-line[7]) in the streaming industry. Conducting this type of research requires a distinct methodological approach: one that considers continuities with the legacy film and television industries and the specificities of screen production in a streaming era. For instance, research on platformization has described the increasing *dependence* of cultural producers on the economic models, governance frameworks, and infrastructures of digital platforms.[8] A similar pattern has been observed in the streaming context, with global streamers exerting increased control over production, distribution, and infrastructures.[9] This introduces a need to revisit and update research frameworks for production studies.

Our emphasis is on above-the-line and below-the-line workers, as well as streaming executives. However, we also want to stress the need to consider production-adjacent players that shape streaming productions in various ways (e.g., location managers, marketing firms, policymakers, and tech companies). In line with a media industry studies approach,[10] our proposed method recognizes the broader context surrounding specific streaming production cultures. This includes legal and regulatory frameworks, cultural specificities (e.g., local language, history, and culture), technological infrastructures, institutional structures and relationships, funding mechanisms, and patterns of media consumption. Since we position our approach within the field of production studies (a subfield of media industry studies[11]), we take particular interest in the beliefs, values, priorities, practices, and rituals of screen workers in this context.[12]

Production Research in the Streaming and Platform Era

The interest in meaning-making activities leads production cultures research to employ a wide array of methods and data sources. As Herbert, Lotz, and Punathambekar point out, common methods include interviews and observation of industrial activities.[13] In this vein, Ortner outlines a method she terms "interface ethnography," which sees the researcher attending events in which the industry presents itself to the public.[14] This broadly resonates with the ethnographic tactic Seaver calls "scavenging"[15] and what Bonini and Gandini–following others–call "multisited ethnography."[16]

There are several benefits to this approach. Referring to Ortner, Mayer notes how observations of industry events allow researchers to put practitioner interviews "in the context of an ethnographic stance . . . towards a whole production culture."[17] Our research follows this ethos. Like Caldwell, we see our approach as "synthetic" because it blends multiple sources and modes of analysis. This strategy allows researchers "to keep these individual research modes 'in check' by placing the discourses and results of any one register (textual, ethnographic, interviews, and political economy) in critical tension or dialogue with the others."[18] We build on the valuable empirical data gathered from interviews by conducting complementary analysis of trade press and company documents, as well as interface ethnography through the observation of industry events. This tension is needed to make sense of the complexities of streaming production cultures.

Existing research on streaming production cultures has already yielded vital insights, both empirically and methodologically. Interviews with creatives in the Arab World brought up unique examples of cultural disconnects in Arabic Netflix productions, which had to be produced in such a way to travel and be universally accessible.[19] Engaging with Korean producers, Kim describes how Netflix is perceived both as an opportunity for big-budget productions and as a threat in terms of its approach to IP rights ownership, potentially reducing Korean producers to "mere subcontractors of global streaming giants."[20] These examples from different markets illustrate the rich information that can only be gained through streaming production studies. Yet the methods used in these projects vary significantly, which is also evident in our own research. For instance, Daphne has engaged with both screen workers and other stakeholders (policymakers and local players) to gain insights into production cultures and cultural policy geared toward streaming services, which impacts local industries.[21] Nina carried out both an interface ethnography and interviews. For the interviews, she made use of drawing exercises to provide interviewees with an alternative way to demonstrate their creative process.[22] In this article, we integrate insights from our own studies with methodological reflections from others.

We also draw on research that grapples with algorithmic opacity and platform power.[23] Poell et al. emphasize how streamers are *not* platform companies, primarily because "they are not directly economically and infrastructurally accessible to third parties."[24] While Netflix and Amazon Prime Video may not be platforms *per se*, they do share significant similarities with

platforms like YouTube. This is especially true from the perspective of cultural producers who are dependent on them.[25] For this reason, there is much to gain by looking sideways to methodological insights in other areas of cultural production. In the next section, we present our creative and replicable roadmap for streaming production research.

Roadmap for Studying Streaming Production Cultures

We use the term "roadmap" in this article to accentuate both the structured and flexible nature of our approach. A roadmap provides a clear, step-by-step route, while also allowing for adaptability depending on the researcher's focus. Unlike tools in a toolbox that function in isolation, our approach is process- and direction-focused. Thus, it offers a suggested sequence that serves as a guide to help scholars navigate the rapidly evolving streaming landscape.

One of the primary issues in a streaming production study relates to *access.* This includes access to production sites, industry people, and insights. As Ortner reminds us, "anthropologists have always had access problems; it is part of the very nature of fieldwork."[26] Her article on "studying up" and "studying sideways" in Hollywood exposes the difficulties of gaining access as an outsider, both to interviews with industry insiders and participant observation in "inside" locations. In the streaming context, certain transformations exacerbate existing challenges.[27] Our roadmap offers strategies for selecting and recruiting interview participants, conducting interviews alongside attending industry events, and analyzing data despite significant barriers. We also provide ethical best practices for reciprocal research.

Tip #1: Recruitment Is Tireless and Personalized in the High-Stakes Streaming Context

Both Nina and Daphne ventured into production studies as PhD students with little connection to the production cultures they were researching. Identifying potential interviewees is one thing. Obtaining contact details and securing an interview with these "exclusive informants"[28] is quite another. This becomes all the more challenging in a streaming context, where local producers are acutely aware of the risks associated with disclosing their experiences with major companies like Netflix or Amazon, stemming from significant power asymmetries and dependencies. This section highlights our most useful strategies to help mitigate some of these challenges.

Researchers can leverage a range of valuable tools to find potential interviewees. Browsing through company websites, trade publications, press releases, industry websites like IMDb, social media channels, or industry mailing lists provides a good starting point. It is worth noting that our research focused primarily on the above-the-line crew (producers, screenwriters, and directors). A different approach is needed for production research focused on the below-the-line crew, as these workers tend to be more precarious and sometimes not connected by name to specific productions. Once a list has been made of potential interviewees, based on the criteria to be established by the researcher, the next step is gathering

actual contact details. In our projects, we found IMDbPro accounts to be invaluable,[29] containing both direct and agency contact information for many individuals on our list. Contacting an agent invariably has a different rate of success, as they function as gatekeepers for their clients, but both Daphne and Nina have positive experiences with this approach. Importantly, the national context being researched affects how readily accessible contact information is. Two useful examples are the Danish Film Institute, which has a public database with contact details of members of the Danish screen and gaming industry,[30] and the Writers Guild of Great Britain, which has an online directory of screenwriters.[31]

A personalized approach usually proves more effective than generic emails. By personalized, we mean emails targeted at a particular individual that mention their work and explain the value of their unique perspective. In these communications, it is crucial to be tenacious, that is, sending follow-ups and being ready to seize the moment whenever it is convenient for busy screen workers. During the recruitment and interview processes, we recommend compiling the contact details and tracking the interview progress in a spreadsheet (see Figure 1).

At the end of our interviews, we invited participants to recommend specific colleagues or other individuals for future interviews. This snowball sampling was fruitful.[32] Crucially, these new connections had more trust and credibility built in from the start because they had been referred by someone in their network. It also led us to participants who had worked on projects that never passed the greenlighting stage, making them near-impossible to track down as industry outsiders.

INTERVIEWEE NAME	ROLE / JOB TITLE	COMPANY / AFFILIATION	SVOD	PRODUCTION	COUNTRY	INTERVIEW STATUS	EMAIL
Roux Lefevre	Producer	Reel Productions	Netflix	Nights in Bruges	Belgium	Done	roux.lefevre@reelproductions.com
Sabina Strøm	Director	Clipper Pictures	Netflix	Velvet Empire	Denmark	Done	sabinastrom@clipperpictures.dk
Zuri Adebayo	Screenwriter	Barking Cactus Films	Netflix	Blue Stars	UK	Scheduled	zuri.adebayo@barkingcactus.co.uk
Deniz Kaya	Screenwriter	KameraWerk	Disney+	Schwarzwald	Germany	Contacted	deniz@kamerawerk.com
Noé Hartmann	Producer	CinéMontage	Amazon	Broken Lens	France	Declined	noehartmann@cinemontage.com
Jules Fischer	Screenwriter	Thameside Pictures	Amazon	Fallen Skies	UK	Not contacted	N/A
Milan Novak	Showrunner	Purple Platapus Pix	Netflix	Nightfall	Croatia	Contacted	novak@purpleplatapuspix.com
Luca Moreau	Producer	CineRoma	Netflix	Venitian Enigma	Italy	Scheduled	luca.moreau@cineroma.com
Nadir Noor	Executive	Turbo Banana Pix	Netflix	Neon Drift	Sweden	Scheduled	nadirnoor@turbobanana.com
Alex Kowalski	Showrunner	Offbeat Pictures	Disney+	Vortex of Souls	Poland	Done	alex@offbeatpictures.com
Florian Müller	Head of Prod.	Bavaria Reelworks	Disney+	Bloodline of Dust	Germany	Done	florian@bavariareelworks.de
Inés Romero	Showrunner	Cataluna Studios	Netflix	Calling Barcelona	Spain	Declined	ines.romero@catalunastudios.com
Toni van den Berg	Producer	Velcro Gorilla Films	Max	Shadowline	Netherlands	Declined	toni@velcrogorillafilms.com
Agnes Berdal	Producer	Silver Fjord Studios	Apple	Russ	Norway	Contacted	agnes@silverfjordstudios.no

Figure 1 Interview Tracking in Action (Sample Spreadsheet with Fictional Details).

In addition to direct emailing, Nina contacted around 120 trade unions and associations, inviting them to share her project through their communication channels. To support this effort, Nina created an industry-facing website with project details, the interview process, and her contact information. Attending industry events also helped her establish new connections, with the Edinburgh TV Festival in August 2019 being a prime example. In one notable session, Amazon's director of European Originals showed a slide called "Pitching to Amazon Studios Europe," which displayed the contact details of executives from several countries.

A final word of advice on recruitment relates to such executives. In our experience, reaching a high-ranking streaming executive requires either a direct link through one's network or the ability to show how the research benefits them. It involves framing one's work in a way that demonstrates how the project serves their strategic interests. Still, this group of interviewees is notoriously difficult to reach, which other researchers have also discussed.[33]

Tip #2: Leverage Geography and Post-Pandemic Habits in a Global Streaming Era

Accessing production spaces has always been tricky for researchers. Ortner describes how "most of the construction of the inside/outside divide is at the level of materiality and space."[34] The positionality of a research project–based on the researcher's geographic location, background, personal connections, and institution–is likely to influence the research sample in various ways. To illustrate, a large proportion of Daphne's interviewees were Dutch, which is perhaps due to them being more willing to participate based on the recognizable brand of the University of Amsterdam. Nina's research was hybrid, with online interviews conducted with interviewees across the European region as well as in-person interviews and observations at industry events. There were benefits and drawbacks associated with both in-person and online fieldwork: Meeting in person provided a glimpse into broader production environments with all their sounds, colors, smells, atmosphere, and social rituals. When you move online, you lose some of the richness of that ethnographic data. Nevertheless, we believe the benefits of the online format far outweigh any downsides.

In the context of global streamers, which produce content in countries all around the world, there is also a significant advantage to being able to access individuals in different countries for comparative or large-scale regional research without relocating. Coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic, new habits–most notably the transition to remote work and increased use of videoconferencing software–have rendered screen workers far and wide more accessible than ever before. During our research, we accessed individuals in twelve countries. The reality is that no entities other than a small handful of global streaming services are commissioning content in so many countries around the world. For researchers interested in these processes and their cultural ramifications, online methods offer a unique opportunity to access these productions on a global scale. In addition to geographic advantages, online interviews also have benefits such as embedded recording/transcribing software,[35] which frees up the interviewer to more closely engage with their interviewee.

As outlined in scholarship on online interviewing, however, this method comes with limitations when it comes to rapport-building due to various factors (e.g., unreliable internet connection).[36] Moreover, this format lacks the social rituals that typically bookend in-person interviews. Given these challenges, we suggest prioritizing rapport-building within the

confines of the online format. This can involve allocating at least a few minutes to small talk at the beginning of the interview, signaling active listening, and replicating in-person eye contact by looking into the webcam occasionally. In our experience, attention to such details makes a tangible difference when it comes to generating rich qualitative data.

Tip #3: Embrace Your Position as a Streaming Industry Outsider

As with all research, a streaming production study will be influenced by the researcher's worldview and standpoint, also called *positionality*.[37] Our positionality is formed through different intersecting social identities, including gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, class, dis/ability, and nationality, alongside the values, beliefs, and experiences we carry with us. As such, all knowledge emerges from a partial perspective–it is "situated."[38] As Ozano and Khatri note, positionality also includes how the researcher views themselves and is regarded by others, that is, "as an insider or outsider, someone with power or who feels powerless, or coming from a privileged or disadvantaged situation."[39] Our relational positions shape our assumptions, our access to and interaction with participants, the questions we pose, and how we interpret the data. In order to ensure rigor in a streaming production study, it is vital to actively reflect on one's positionality and how it both facilitates and restricts the research.

In our own case, we have confronted various aspects of our positionality throughout our production studies. As female researchers in our early thirties, we have especially noticed how our age and career stage have impacted the fieldwork. For instance, a few participants referred to the research as a "school project," suggesting that it was perceived as part of our learning process rather than a formal academic study. It has also influenced our access–or lack thereof–to specific individuals within the industry. For instance, Nina emailed more than one hundred screen workers in her search for participants. A large number did not reply, while eleven declined for various reasons. One executive noted the high volume of emails from academics and students, while also expressing skepticism about the ability of research to bring about meaningful change in the sector (Figure 2).

Sent: 05 March 2020 15:11
To: Rasmussen, Nina <nina.rasmussen@kcl.ac.uk>
Subject: Re: Interview - Research Project at King's College London

Hi Nina -

Thanks for your message.
I have to confess that we receive so many requests for interviews/research proposals/Master's thesis collaborations that it's becoming a full time job ;-)
Unfortunately we have to decline your interview request. We simply don't have time.

. . . No matter how many studies or reports are written each year on the topic, the industry will never change (at least in Europe).

Just my 2 cents!

Good luck,

[Name]

Figure 2 Email From the CEO of an AI Startup (Personal Correspondence, March 5, 2020).

Building on Seaver's notion of "texture of access,"[40] we highlight the need to consider who controls knowledge, who decides what is worth discussing, and how accessible industry people are to researchers. It is telling when someone rejects an interview and how. That includes if someone initially accepts to participate but balks at the consent form, which Nina experienced when reaching out to two global streaming executives. Such instances illuminate some of the broader power structures in the streaming industry.

In our experience, the level of access to insights can both be hindered and enhanced by one's position as an industry outsider. We found that several participants worried about the issue of confidentiality: Could they trust us to not (accidentally) reveal their identities? One producer, for instance, said that Netflix is "not the best party to work for." Then, pointing at Nina's audio recorder, the producer added that if their comments were traced back to them, they would have to shut down their business. Daphne encountered similar responses in her interviews. Such concerns likely impacted the data in some interviews, as workers may have withheld certain experiences due to fears of jeopardizing future revenue streams. In other cases, however, our position as industry outsiders might have led to *more* candid reflections from participants. Consider the following remark from a showrunner Nina interviewed:

> I don't want Netflix to be in a position to feel that I've been, you know, disclosing too much. . . . At the same time, I think this needs to go public, and this is such an important part of the business that it has such an impact. . . . I'm not afraid of them, but they are still really powerful, and they don't like people to mess with what they're doing.

The interview snippet underlines the power asymmetry between the interviewee and Netflix. Even so, the showrunner wants to contribute confidential information because they want this "important part of the business" to go public. The participant reiterated that Nina should refrain from mentioning specific names and titles, adding: "But I trust you. Fundamentally, I trust you more than I trust Netflix. . . . Because you're not here to conquer the world or to be the biggest company on the stock market, right?" Here, the showrunner's perception of Nina's impartiality made it easier for them to speak more openly and critically.

The details offered also depend on the screen worker's relationship with the streamer. For instance, Daphne interviewed a creator who had an intensely negative experience with Netflix and was determined not to collaborate with them again. Meanwhile, another creator had secured a new exclusive Netflix deal with a franchise in the pipeline. These contrasting situations led to striking differences in terms of what they were each willing to share and how their perspectives should be interpreted. In short, the positionality of both the researcher and the interviewee will always inform a streaming production study. It is crucial to acknowledge these relative positions, and how they evolve across contexts, situations–and over time.

Tip #4: Decode Streaming Lore and Spokesperson Speak

Researching streaming production cultures requires scholars to be polyglots, translating across academic and industry jargon. Gaining valuable insights starts with asking the right questions, which necessitates understanding the diverse roles and cultural contexts of interviewees. For instance, contributions from an executive producer will differ from those of

a screenwriter or line producer, even if they worked on the same project. Yet, these lines are also blurring and evolving, especially in the European context where streamers have accelerated the adoption of the US-style showrunner model.[41] It is increasingly common for writers to be involved in production. In conducting production research of global streamers, scholars therefore also need to have a strong understanding of the local production culture they are examining. As Bruun writes about production studies interviews more broadly, the researcher's knowledge of the subject and broader issues at stake (as well as the content) plays a fundamental role in establishing trust.[42]

Another language skill required for streaming production research is decoding "industry lore"[43] and "streaming lore."[44] The former is a term coined to describe "how industry insiders imagine television programming, its audiences, and the kinds of textual practices that can and cannot be profitable."[45] Building on this concept, "streaming lore" refers to the emergence of "streaming as a force that is fracturing existing industry lore and pushing nascent organizational principles to the surface."[46] Powerful narratives from industry insiders have existed as long as the media industries. What has changed with streaming is the nature of these narratives and the hype surrounding them.

Trade press and streaming services themselves have contributed significantly to the narrative that these services are dramatically reshaping the media landscape. For instance, trade press articles have repeatedly blown up the extent of data collection and use in production. Anecdotes from big American showrunners like Cary Fukunaga suggested that subscriber data directly impact the commissioning and production practices of streamers, with creatives "taking notes from Netflix's algorithm."[47] Yet, scholars like Seaver[48] and van Es[49] have pushed back against these narratives, arguing that human interpretation and gut feel still play a persistent role.

Unpacking streaming lore is needed to gain insights into how the streaming era's distinct pressures and opportunities differ from those of legacy film and television industries. It can also be a useful source for structuring interview questions. Yet, in our research, we found screen workers often rejected these narratives because they did not recognize their personal experiences in them. In particular, there was a lot of hesitancy around the role of data in production.

Multiple interviewees in our studies were quick to initially claim that data played no part in their productions, echoing prevailing streaming lore. However, other parts of those same interviews ultimately revealed that data *did* influence their production practices, but in subtle ways. This is what Nina has described as "sensing data," which refers to the fact that screen workers rarely have direct access to explicit data but instead interpret or sense data through interactions with streaming executives.[50] For researchers, identifying these interactions with data requires a sensitivity to how workers derive meaning from limited or indirect access to information. Recognizing how these informal, sometimes speculative, forms of knowledge shape production processes is essential for developing a more comprehensive understanding of the streaming industry.

While streaming lore originates from the industry, it also takes on a life of its own and may not feel representative to screen workers engaged by global streamers, especially outside of

the United States. In these cases, the mythology built up around streamers can in fact be a barrier to insights as screen workers believe they must debunk these stories before being able to reflect on their personal experiences. Researching streaming production cultures is therefore an ongoing negotiation of meaning and value in an ever-evolving media ecosystem.

Finally, in conducting research into streaming production cultures, it is likely you will at some point encounter "spokesperson speak." We use this term to capture interviews not only with actual spokespeople but also with certain executives/creatives/producers who are more rehearsed, guarded, and trained in their responses. These individuals may be making statements on behalf of a streaming service or production company and have a vested interest in what they are sharing. Figure 3 exemplifies "spokesperson speak" in action. In this dialog, we have underlined segments that echo statements in press releases and were repeated nearly verbatim by other interviewees when discussing Netflix's European content policy. At the time of conducting this research in 2021, there was a heated debate in the Dutch media industry around the implementation of the amended Audiovisual Media Services Directive. Netflix, local broadcasters, and production companies were actively lobbying for different definitions and obligations that would be most beneficial to them. Capitalizing on that particular moment, these entities were more accessible and willing to participate in this research project, as it provided them with another outlet to argue their case. A few years later, Daphne contacted the same interviewee for a different research project that was not related to any current affairs. She received no response.

It is crucial to be cognizant of the goals of interviewees and alert to statements that may be strategically vague, euphemistic, or obfuscating. For example, an official Netflix representative is likely to emphasize rehearsed narratives that align with the brand image and priorities of the company. As Bruun points out, however, we should approach the agendas exclusive informants bring to interviews as part of the research findings,[51] for instance as part of what Caldwell calls "the industry's own self-representation, self-critique, and self-reflection."[52] Finally, when encountering such instances, we also suggest carefully analyzing, cross-referencing, and framing such insights with other sources of data, such as trade

DAPHNE: When Netflix sources European content, what kind of editorial criteria do you use? Is there a certain kind of European content you look for in terms of genre, age, etc.?

NETFLIX SPOKESPERSON: No, I think from a member's perspective, you see we do all things. For us, it's most important that we work with great producers, with great talents across Europe, and we love to tell exciting stories, diverse stories, high-quality stories that are best in their category. But we don't search for a specific type of genre, we have documentary series, films, kids content, animation, it can be in any form.

DAPHNE: And is the content's global appeal or ability to travel a consideration?

NETFLIX SPOKESPERSON: At this moment, we are producing local for local. So, if you are for example in the Netherlands, we have Dutch titles we produce for our Dutch members. It's nice if the members in Belgium also watch, it's even more nice if it's such a great title that everybody in the world can watch it, but that's more the cherry on the cake, not the cake itself.

DAPHNE: Netflix recently announced a new slate of Dutch content. What motivates Netflix to acquire or develop Dutch content?

NETFLIX SPOKESPERSON: Because people love European content, Dutch members love Dutch content. [. . .] So our investments and new slate really reflect this appetite of our members.

Figure 3 Spokesperson Speak in Action (Daphne Interview Transcript, 2021).

press, industry events, and existing research. Given the significant power imbalances in the streaming industry–and the widespread use of NDAs–balancing different sources and modes of analysis is critical.

Tip #5: Analyze beyond the Transcript

The first key to effective analysis is understanding that everything that happens along the way also counts as data. It is essential to continuously make note of one's subjective reflections on the more ephemeral qualities of production research. After every interview, we recommend gathering initial impressions in more coherent prose that touches on things like mood, nonverbal responses, surprises, communication before and after the interview, and initial ideas for analysis. These fieldwork notes add detail and depth to the audio/video recordings and transcripts. While useful in any interview, these notes become essential when analyzing the often-opaque streaming industry. The researcher must scavenge insights from multiple sources, frequently encountering obstacles and challenges. As a result, tracking the texture of access[53] across different sites becomes a vital part of the analytical process.

In terms of analysis, both Nina and Daphne followed Braun and Clarke's guidelines for reflexive thematic analysis.[54] They propose a valuable guide of six flexible phases of thematic analysis, namely, data familiarization and notes, coding, generating themes, developing/reviewing themes, refining/defining/naming themes, and writing.[55] In the context of production research, this process involves a combination of repeated close reading of data sources, note-taking, coding, writing, and rewriting, to ultimately glean prevalent themes.

The final step of the analytical process is to connect key themes with the overarching research question(s) and literature. In researching streaming production cultures, this may include a wide range of sources: existing research, trade press, industry reports, legal documents, letters to investors, etc. In this vein, textual analysis of the content worked on and discussed by interviewees–if released–can be a valuable way to see certain creative notes brought to life. This analytical process is fundamentally subjective and imbued with the researcher's decisions, interests, and interpretations, all of which are elements that should never be taken for granted but actively foregrounded in research outputs.

Tip #6: Adopt Ethics of Care and Reciprocity in the Secretive Streaming Environment

Researchers investigating streaming production cultures will encounter numerous ethical issues in the field. For that reason, ethical principles should be built into the project from the start. This tends to happen naturally when you apply for ethical approval from your university ethics committee, which ensures that your project adheres to the institutional rules, guidelines, and research standards. These requirements vary across institutions. While some may accept verbal consent as sufficient, others mandate more rigorous protocols, including written consent and detailed information sheets. We have found that participants often value a formalized consent process, as it reassures them of the research's integrity and demonstrates a clear commitment to respecting their rights. This is imperative in a secretive streaming environment where screen workers often feel concerned about the potential risks of disclosing proprietary data.

During recruitment: After making initial contact with a screen worker, I (the researcher) would send through additional information and ask them to sign a consent form. Awareness of their participation was restricted to me and the screen worker in question. Sometimes, a colleague might also know because they had delegated the interview to them. When using the snowballing technique, I requested several names and only reached out to a few.

During data generation: In offline interviews, I met with participants in their workplace or a public location like a café. We managed to speak in a relatively private setting such as in a meeting room or outside. For online interviews, I kept the interview confidential on my end by being alone in the room.

During data analysis/storage: Data gathered during the research was encrypted and stored separately from personal details. These personal details and the encryption key were only accessible to me. This data was stored on a password-protected computer that was kept in a locked place. I made use of transcription services whose employees had signed strict confidentiality agreements, a detail I included in the consent form.

During data reporting: All identifying information has been removed in research outputs, including names, projects, location, and similar identifiers. I use they/them pronouns to further guard participants' identities and only refer to their title. I have also been careful with the level of detail reported about the specific experiences and situations shared by participants.

Figure 4 Maintaining Confidentiality Throughout the Various Research Stages.[56]

As already mentioned, screen workers usually sign strict NDAs, meaning they are prohibited from sharing information or materials that have been deemed confidential by the streamer in question. In other words, these workers may face professional or legal repercussions if they breach their NDAs. This introduces an ethical concern for researchers carrying out a streaming production study: How can you safeguard the confidentiality of participants while providing sufficient detail about the streaming productions in research outputs? Over-anonymizing the findings can strip important context from the research, potentially losing the nuances and specificities that are central to production studies. Striking the right balance is hard, and it will vary depending on the scope and nature of the project. In Figure 4, we offer one example of what confidentiality measures can look like during recruitment, data generation, data analysis/storage, and data reporting.

We see such measures as part of a wider ethics of care framework,[57] which has especially been articulated and applied by feminist scholars since the 1980s. Researchers have caring obligations toward participants before, during, and after interviews. This responsibility becomes particularly pronounced when touching on the more sensitive and emotional aspects of streaming labor. For instance, one screenwriter who had a frustrating experience with Amazon Studios explained to Nina how the interview felt "kind of [like] therapy," noting that it was "a good process for me to let it out." While this writer found value in expressing their frustrations, it also underscores the need for researchers to approach interviews with care, sensitivity, and empathy. One has a responsibility to not publish anything that could place the participant in a vulnerable position.

The ethics of care framework also highlights the importance of *reciprocity*.[58] We see this as the concerted effort to "give back" to the participants and their industry more broadly. Several screen workers we interviewed expressed a desire to reveal the downsides of streaming without risking their own careers and future income. This confirms Ortner's point that participants need practical or intellectual interest in the research to take part.[59] Production studies can offer a valuable platform for screen workers to share their experiences with their industry and the wider public. In our case, we have sought to stimulate industry debate by

sharing our findings beyond the academy, for instance via industry channels like trade publications, newsletters, videos, podcasts, etc.

Where Next? Future Directions for Streaming Production Studies

Researching streaming production means navigating a complex landscape filled with roadblocks and detours. Central challenges include restricted access to participants, bypassing corporate gatekeeping, and addressing power asymmetries between researchers and interviewees. The researcher must also consider ethical concerns around confidentiality, which will have direct implications for the scope of the research. Keeping a long-term perspective in mind is key: Production studies are rarely a one-time thing for researchers but rather part of a deep interest that may span years to decades. As such, it is critical to think about production studies as building a network of contacts that you maintain a positive rapport with and may come back to in the future for new research projects or events.

Our roadmap for streaming production research has provided strategies for overcoming these barriers, emphasizing the need for an innovative, ethical, and reflexive approach. This includes embracing your own experience and position in the field, understanding the nuances of different "languages" you will encounter, and continuously making a note of your subjective reflections on the more ephemeral qualities of production research. Streaming production studies are inevitably flexible and exploratory, with insights evolving through the course of fieldwork, often differing between the start and end of the project. The study's scope and findings are also shaped by limitations in focus and access. This roadmap thus outlines potential sights to see, although the route and destination may change.

Following and adapting these tips should aid scholars conducting research into streaming production cultures, and provide some transferable insights for those in parallel fields. In considering the future agenda for streaming production research, we highlight a few questions we believe will be of vital importance in the coming years: How do screen workers in different parts of the world interact with streaming data and big data analytics more broadly? How do screen workers negotiate global streamers, individually and collectively? What are the cultural implications of creative and editorial input from streaming executives? Finally, how will the ongoing integration of generative artificial intelligence (generative AI) tools by global streamers impact cultural producers?[60]

Despite ongoing changes, it is worth stressing that the screen industry is also marked by significant circularity. Many practices can still be understood through the lens of legacy film and television studies, indicating that not everything is new. At the same time, we are acutely aware of the evolving nature of the screen ecosystem and have sought to provide future-proof tips.

With increasing convergence between streamers and platforms, we argue that the initial distinction between these two types of services may become less important from a cultural production perspective.[61] Finally, we are writing this article in the wake of major strikes and

negotiations by writer, director, and actor unions around streaming and generative AI. Production studies will be vital to cut through the hype surrounding generative AI and understand the intricacies of the risks, opportunities, and regulatory responses to new technologies.

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