Sonia Livingstone
Giving people a voice: on the critical role of the interview in the history of audience research
Article (Accepted version)
(Refereed)

Giving people a voice:
On the critical role of the interview in the history of audience research

Abstract
Inspired by the ''keywords in communication'' theme of the 2009 ICA conference, this paper observes the pivotal role played by ''the interview'' in the history of audience research. Although interviewing implies bidirectionality, research following Lazarsfeld constructed the powerful interviewer and obedient interviewee, a tradition challenged by the critical turn in reception studies and its emphasis on interviewee expertise. This enabled research to pose crucial challenges to media and communication theory through giving the audience a voice. Yet today, this challenge risks being undermined as textbooks emphasize traditional methods, as the analysis of new media repositions mass audiences as "passive," and as researchers seem reluctant in practice to go out and talk to the public.

Inspired by the 'keywords in communication' theme of the 2009 ICA conference, this paper observes the pivotal role played by one research method, 'the interview', in the history of audience research. Simonson (2009) notes that the 'interview' originally referenced the ceremonial meetings of royalty - in an interview with the Queen, power lay with the Queen, with the interviewer as supplicant. More recently, Simonson suggests, interviews have figured within diverse 'ecologies of power' but one approach has undoubtedly predominated, in direct contrast with the royal model. When Lazarsfeld (1944) specified the techniques of open-ended interviewing for studying public opinion, power lay clearly with the *interviewer* – constructed as a scrupulously impersonal expert trained to 'gather' uncontaminated information from obedient subjects. And it was this approach that framed the early decades of audience research, including uses and gratifications, attitudinal and some effects studies. But although the Lazarsfeld tradition persists in the toolkit approach of many text books, it has been strongly challenged. In *Keywords*, Williams (1983) traced historical shifts in the power relations underlying each keyword, noting that 'the primary goal in each entry was to unsettle any (usually conservative) fixing of the meaning of a keyword' (Jones, 2006: 1210). Scrutiny of the term 'interview' surely emphasizes its bi-directionality ('inter'), and it was a renewed recognition of this power of interviewees to grant an interview (as well as recognition of the potential abuses of power on behalf of interviewers) which stimulated critical rethinking of the relation between researcher and researched.

Half a century on from Lazarsfeld, critical researchers do 'research with' rather than 'research on' their interviewees (once 'subjects', then 'respondents', now 'informants' or 'participants'), treating them with respect, checking findings with them to test the credibility of the findings, and designing research so as to be beneficial to interviewees as well as to the (still generally more powerful) interviewer. In terms of feminist methodology, this is to undermine the 'masculine paradigm' in which 'interviewing necessitates the manipulation of interviewees as objects of study… [although, paradoxically] this can only be achieved via a certain amount of humane treatment' (Oakley, 2005: 218). In other words, the masculine paradigm encourages a deceptively gentle approach which ensures the interviewee provides just what the interviewer requires in a manner far from the egalitarian power relations implied by the notion of *inter*-view (Doucet & Mauthner, 2008). The critical alternative, then, enables interviewees to negotiate the terms of the interview and to express themselves freely, including scope for them to question, surprise or challenge the interviewer.

It was this potential for surprise, in the rethought 'interview', that proved so generative in the history of audience research and, consequently, in the wider field of media and communications. In the 1980s and 90s, the critical turn, drawing energy from parallel developments in, most notably, cultural studies, social semiotics, feminist research, consumption studies and the anthropology of everyday life, determined to give the audience a voice, and this opened the way to a sea change in the wider critical analysis of media power (Livingstone, 1998). Findings from a series of interview studies (including the individual interviews of Hobson, 1982; Hodge & Tripp, 1986; Lewis, 1991; Radway, 1984; Schrøder, 1988, as well as the focus group interviews of Liebes & Katz, 1990; Livingstone & Lunt, 1994; Morley, 1992) demanded that 'the audience', singular, had to be rethought as 'audiences', plural – for audiences turned out to take up, with alacrity, wit and enthusiasm the polysemic invitations of media texts. The audience, noun, had to be rethought in terms of verbs –

engaging, interpreting, negotiating, playing, critiquing, even audiencing (Fiske, 1992) – while the noun was appropriated by industry and state (Ang, 1996).

Most important, interviewing audiences became the Trojan horse that opened up new forms of inquiry. First, it undermined the authority of elite textual analysts who had long conjured up model readers and sutured subjects without checking if empirical readers were dutifully following. Second, it revealed the everyday micro-tactics of appropriation that reshape and remediate media forms and goods, forcing academic recognition of marginalised voices, unexpected experiences and the importance of the lifeworld in the circuit of culture. Third, it challenged theories of political economy and media imperialism, revealing processes of reappropriation, glocalisation, counterflow and, occasionally, resistance to dominant media power. Last, it helped explain why the universalistic claims of media effects theories only ever apply contingently, for media influence always depends on the context. In short, drawing on a rich mixture of semiotic theory, cultural critique, anthropological methods and the feminist revalorisation of the 'everyday', audience reception studies, accompanied by audience ethnographies, launched a successful challenge to hitherto dominant theories of mass communication.

This story is no longer new, but in the subsequent rush to embrace ever more ethnographic methods, we should not overlook this history as much has been gained by talking to or directly asking the audience (interview methods can complement and compensate for the limitations of observational ones; Höijer, 2008). This is not to advocate a naive empiricism, but rather to emphasise that, when claims are taken for granted about what audiences do or think or understand – claims which are often homogenising, dismissive or patronising, the very act of going out to speak with them can be critical (Hartley, 2006). For this reason, accounts of audience research often begin with the thesis to be critiqued or the myth to be countered – that soap opera audiences are mindless or that talk show audiences are voyeuristic – in order then to reveal a more complex and illuminating picture of interpretative activity in context. To give two examples from many, van Zoonen (2001) found by listening carefully to the audiences for *Big Brother* that the show provides an opportunity to renegotiate established boundaries between public and private, even questioning the ways that elites maintain their privilege (see also Livingstone & Lunt, 1994, on the talk show). Second, as Fiske (1992: 191) argued of audiences for a popular sitcom, their calling it 'the most "realistic show" on television' does not make them stupid but rather reveals how they use 'its carnivalesque elements as ways of expressing the difference between their experience of family life and that proposed for them by the dominant social norms'.

Audiences' engagement with supposedly trashy genres may allow them to explore what is real and how things could be otherwise, especially in relation to the gender and class relations of everyday life (Ang, 1996; Morley, 1992; Radway, 1984). This argument is not intended to assert naïve notions of audience autonomy or over-blown claims of resistance, for 'these models of audience activity were not … designed … to make us forget the question of media power, but rather to be able to conceptualize it in more complex and adequate ways' (Morley, 2006: 106). It is for these reasons that Schrøder et al (2003: 143) reframe what it means to 'ask the audience' thus:
> 'Reception research methodology is predicated upon the qualitative research interview, which is used as a discursive generator for obtaining an insight into

the interpretative repertoires at the disposal of the informants as they make sense of a specific media product. The interview is thus, ultimately, a vehicle for bringing forward the media-induced meanings of the informants' lifeworld'.

In short, to undermine the authority of text analysts is not to deny the role of media forms and texts. To recognise local processes of meaning making is not to deny the political-economic might of media conglomerates. To see media influence as contingent is not to deny its existence. To recognise the shaping role of diverse lifeworlds is not to deny the social structures that, in turn, shape those lifeworlds. My defensive tone arises from the fact that all of these and other claims have, over the years, been levied at practitioners of audience research, notwithstanding the critical force of their theoretical and empirical insights, as I have sought to document in brief here.

Yet for some, going out and asking audiences still seems difficult - students and even colleagues betray a rather practical reluctance to going outside the university, perhaps a distaste for risky negotiations with 'real people' on their home ground. They look a little guilty when it is pointed out that, although they have diligently studied media production, coded media representations, or examined public accounts of daily practices, they have omitted a key element in Johnson's (1986/7) 'circuit of culture', for this includes consumption as well as production or, for Hall (1982), decoding as well as encoding or, indeed, as for Habermas (1987), the lifeworld as well as the system world.. Yet how else can research move beyond positioning audiences as the most spoken for and presumed about constituency in today's mediated ecologies of power?

Although the critical potential of giving the audience a voice has been recognised, now that theories and methods are once again being rethought for a digital age, it seems that we risk slipping back. When one hears that internet use is active by comparison with passive television audiences, or that interactive texts pose interpretative challenges unprecedented in media history, or when one is presented with analyses of new media forms packed with unspoken assumptions about how people (often rendered singular as 'the user') engage with them, it seems the argument for active audiences is easily forgotten (Press & Livingstone, 2006). Indeed, taking audiences for granted seems to come naturally. Each year when I teach my course on audiences, I find students readily forget to distinguish implied from actual audiences, not noticing whether a book about *Big Brother* includes audience interviews, and not noticing that Schrøder (1988) did speak to *Dynasty* audiences but that Gripsrud (1995) did not, that Radway (1984) engaged with empirical audiences and Modleski (1982) did not. Curiously, it remains easy to presume that one knows what other people think or feel.

Although audience studies have left behind Lazarsfeld's 'masculine' paradox of impersonal humanity, Hermes (2006: 156) suggests a new paradox has inspired and, simultaneously, undermined the critical potential of empirical work: 'The impetus behind audience research is precisely motivated by the wish not to speak on behalf of others even though, as a researcher, one does exactly that.' (Hermes, 2006: 156). This reminds us that at the heart of the interview is not only speech but also listening. A poorly conducted interview may be marked both by an interviewee reluctant to speak

and by an interviewer who fails to listen carefully. But ask we must, and listen we must, for it is vital to go out and meet the audiences we theorise about.

References

Ang, I. (1996). *Living Room Wars: Rethinking Media Audiences for a Postmodern World*. London: Routledge.

Doucet, A., & Mauthner, N. (2008). Qualitative interviewing and feminist research. In P. Alasuutari, L. Bickman & J. Brannen (Eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Social Research Methods* (pp. 328-343). London: Sage.

Fiske, J. (1992). Audiencing: A cultural studies approach to watching television. *Poetics*, 21, 345-359.

Gripsrud, J. (1995). *Dynasty Years: Hollywood Television and Critical Media Studies* London: Routledge.

Habermas, J. (1987). *The Theory of Communicative Action. Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason* (T. McCarthy, Trans. Vol. 2). Cambridge, U. K.: Polity.

Hall, S. (1980). Encoding/Decoding. In S. Hall, D. Hobson, A. Lowe, & P. Willis (Eds.), *Culture, Media, Language.* London: Hutchinson.

Hartley, J. (2006). '*Read thy self*': Text, audience, and method in cultural studies. In M. White & J. Schwoch (Eds.), *Questions of Method in Cultural Studies* (pp. 71-104). Oxford: Blackwell.

Hermes, J. (2006). Feminism and the politics of method. In M. White & J. Schwoch (Eds.), *Questions of Method in Cultural Studies* (pp. 154-174). Oxford: Blackwell.

Hobson, D. (1982). *Crossroads: The Drama of a Soap Opera*. London: Methuen.

Hodge, R., & Tripp, D. (1986). *Children and Television: A Semiotic Approach*. Cambridge: Polity.

Höijer, B. (2008). Ontological assumptions and generalizations in qualitative (audience) research. *European Journal of Communication, 23*(3), 275-294.

Johnson, R. (1986/7). What is cultural studies anyway? *Social Text 16*, 38-80.

Jones, P. (2006). Thirty years of keywords. *Sociology, 40*(6), 1209-1215.

Lazarsfeld, P. F. (1944). The controversy over detailed interviews-- an offer for negotiation. *Public Opinion Quarterly, 8*, 38-60.

Liebes, T., & Katz, E. (1990). *The export of meaning*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lewis, J. (1991). *The ideological octopus: an exploration of television and its audience*. London: Routledge.

Livingstone, S. (1998). *Making Sense of Television* (2nd ed.). London: Routledge.

Livingstone, S., & Lunt, P. (1994). *Talk on Television*. London: Routledge.

Modleski, T. (1982). *Loving with a Vengeance*. New York: Methuen.

Morley, D. (1992). *Television, audiences and cultural studies*. London: Routledge.

Morley, D. (2006). Unanswered questions in audience research. *The Communication Review, 9*(2), 101-121.

Oakley, A. (2005). Interviewing women: A contradiction in terms? In *The Ann Oakley Reader: Gender, Women and Social Science* (pp. 217-232). Bristol: Polity.

Press, A., & Livingstone, S. (2006). Taking audience research into the age of new media: Old problems and new challenges. In I. M. White & J. Schwoch (Eds.), *The Question of Method in Cultural Studies.* (pp. 175-200). Oxford: Blackwell.

Radway, J. (1984). *Reading the Romance*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Schrøder, K. (1988). The pleasure of 'Dynasty': The weekly reconstruction of self-confidence. In P. Drummond & R. Paterson (Eds.), *Television and its Audience: International Research Perspectives*. London: British Film Institute.

Schrøder, K., Drotner, K., Kline, S., & Murray, C. (2003). *Researching Audiences*. London: Arnold.

Simonson, P. (2009). *The Interview*. Paper presented at the 59th Annual Conference of the International Communication Association, Chicago.

Williams, R. (1983). *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. London: Fontana.

Van Zoonen, L. (2001). Desire and resistance: Big Brother and the recognition of everyday life. *Media, Culture and Society, 23*(5), 669-677.