

Used in researching audiences media essay



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Methods concentrate on counting and statistics and focus on in-depth analysis of information dissemination. According to Hartley (2002, p. 11), "The audience is a construction motivated by the paradigm in which it is imagined", that is to say the different paradigms may cause the location of the audience's role to be disparate. To research on this, various methods are needed. Referring to cultural studies, quantitative and qualitative are two of the most widely used methodologies in the field of audience research; in which, moreover, qualitative methods have been regarded as generally preferable because they place emphasis on cultural meaning (Barker, 2012). Specifically, ethnography and interview are two of the most popular methods which belong to qualitative methods and have been widely used in audience research during 1980s-1990s.

This paper will focus on ethnography method and interview method and then critically analyze them by reviewing relevant studies. It will construct by three parts. The first and the second part will lay out the theoretical dimensions separately of these two methods with looking at the advantages and limitations of them by using the leading research projects from 1980s-1990s; for example: Dorothy Hobson's research on housewives with radio and television^{1/4}Janice Radway's research on women reading the romance^{1/4}David Morley focuses on the " Nationwide" audience. In part three, these two methods will be compared and contrasted.

Ethnography used to be taken in anthropology study primordially, which is a branch of science describing a kind of culture or ethnic groups. Essentially, the ethnography method is " a holistic description of cultural membership" (Lindlof and Taylor, 2002). Specifically, according to Fetterman (1989), it is a

process begin with in-depth and rich investigating, followed by interview, record review, perspectives assessing, exploring the organizational connections, and finally write a report to be published. The characteristics of ethnography can be divided into three aspects: Firstly, it uses the holistic research viewpoint. The ethnographer attempts to describe the culture or the social group through the research of history, religion, politics, economy, and environment; therefore, it emphasizes the contextualization of data (ibid). Similarly, Geertz (1973, p. 16) highlights that "ethnography is thick description", ethnographers grasp the complexity of social community and culture by using this "thick description" and restore audience's interpretation from a small range of text structure to social and historical environment. Secondly, in this process, ethnographers should keep an open mind, trying not to leave out any information. They do not mind spending several hours even only chatting with interviewees; they do a great deal of observation so that they can truly understand the real lives of audiences via equal communications. With discourse analysis, researchers can trace the social power factors behind the words which interviewees have said. However, this does not mean that researchers can conduct the interview with no explicit objectives; a framework reflects their own intention is still needed to carry on an open style interview, seeking information as much as possible. This issue was pointed out as "with an open mind not an empty head" by Fetterman (1989, p. 1). Thirdly, fieldwork is the most important factor in designing ethnographic method. Ruddock (2001) states that ethnography is attractive because it is based on naturally occurring data rather than artificial materials. This method requires researchers conduct the fieldwork in a natural environment: entering into the community of

audiences instead of sitting in their offices and doing research in written form. It usually involves in-depth observation and investigation of a specific audience group or some cases. As Hammersley and Atkinson(1983cited in Barker, 2000) highlight that, researchers often immerse in the context, they participate in people's daily life for a long period of time, observing what happens, watching the audiences, listening to their opinions, asking questions, analyzing what people 'do' with media, and how they 'make sense' of it. Above all, using ethnography in audience research compensates for the inadequacies of past studies. Ethnographic audience research had become a trend in the 1980s, and there were several studies becoming classic works afterwards because they have adopted the ethnographic method.

In the multiple cases of ethnography studies, Radway's research which focuses on women reading the romantic fictions is recognized classic work. She connected the pleasure women felt in reading romantic fiction with the subordinate status of women in the patriarchal family and then investigated them; and she found that the reason why women read romantic fictions was related to evading the pressure of onerous housework. Radway (1984) demonstrates that the women treat reading the romance as a kind of "independent declaration"; they seek to rebuild their gender subjectivity in utopian fantasy in order to resist patriarchal culture. In early stage, her focus of attention was text analysis, later changed to reception research. At that moment, the content of text was no longer important, but reading itself is the process which establish the meaning and pleasure between text and reader, and the results cannot be predicted by the text itself (Curran, 1991).

It seems to be undoubted that *Reading the Roman* plays a vital role in culture studies, largely due to the important ethnographic finding of cultural consumption it provides. However, some debates challenge this view: methodologist queries about empirical research and epistemology; feminists argue the relationship between feminists and 'real' women; populist question its critical project. Modleski (1986, cited in Wood, 2004, ἐῖμϑ) accuses *Reading the Romance* has over liberated the pleasures the women get from reading fictions. Ang (1988, cited in Wood, 2004, ἐῖμϑ) states that " the book does not take the possibilities of pleasure and fantasy seriously enough". Lauren Berlant (1987, cited in Wood, 2004) argues that Radway placed too much emphasis on describing the female identity. Although there are many critics about her study, undeniably, the concept stressing the interacting between diverse disciplines which advocate by *Reading the Romance* lays a foundation in cultural studies and is regarded as a leading project for over twenty years, until now it has still been used as a compulsory reading for students to learn.

In addition to print media, Dorothy Hobson's research on housewives and the mass media cannot be overlooked. The data is shown in Hobson's unpublished MA dissertation 'A Study of Working-Class Women at Home: Femininity, Domesticity and Maternity'. Through talking with housewives, Hobson (1980, p. 85) found that " television and radio are never mentioned as spare-time or leisure activities but are located by the women as integral parts of their day". As for those housewives, television and radio were regarded as the important elements in their daily lives, even their work and rest time were formulated by broadcast. They considered the broadcast

programs as a friend and a crucial way for them to contact with outside world and to eliminate loneliness. Based on gender differences the understandings of television can also be divided into 'two worlds'; which means men and women have dissimilar preferences. This study marks the beginning of gender analysis on audience.

Turner (1998) explains that Hobson did not take the audiences into the world of an academic researcher, while it was she who participated in their world. She entered into the audience's house, watching soap opera with them, observing and interviewing them during that period. After the programs finished, she used to talk with the audiences in an open type for a long time. She asked the audience to determine what is interesting, what do they like or dislike or what do they concern about in those programs they had watched before. The audiences were encouraged by her to tell the reason why the program is popular or why it is criticized by them.

To conclude, both these two studies carried out by Hobson and Radway have great significance in the history of audience research. Hobson's study is the first time that ethnographer study on the female audiences, and it is considered to be the first time in the history that ethnography is truly applied in audience research. The main contribution of this study is that it states the specific meanings of gender in the case of dealing with housework. Radway concurs in and further develops Hoson's viewpoint of gender differences; she concerned with the common populace's power in domestic context of consumption. In terms of the method in audience research, using ethnographic method should be a kind of progress or breakthrough because it has opened up an unprecedented field of research. The results of such <https://assignbuster.com/used-in-researching-audiences-media-essay/>

research are conducted by the researchers' personal participant experience. The aim of research changes from a one-sided issue extends to an overall scope of daily life; researchers get out of their offices and enter into common people's living room experience their real lives – at least the visible behavior in their lives. Although this approach is still debatable; however, as Zoonen (1994: 146) claims, in terms of the location of the researchers, there is no single truth in the world; the reason why we acknowledge the truth is due to the participation of researchers, they learn to tell us, or to depict detailed map. However, some limitations are still exist in ethnography. First of all, the relationships between researcher and researched is difficult. Due to the fact that people often tell the truth to whom they are familiar with, so it is not easy for researcher to integrate into the community and to gain their trust. Ruddock (2001) notes that it is important to arrange researcher and researched in a relatively equal position. Moreover, ethnography requires researcher to stay with the community for a long period of time; for instance, several months or even two or three years. Therefore it is a time-consuming task; it may take a significant amount of human and material resource.

Interview

Many researchers have found that interview is a particularly appropriate method to understand the experiences and opinions of researched.

Kvale(1996, p. 1) proposes that" if you want to know how people understand their world and their life, why not talk with them?" As a most widely used method, it has three remarkable characteristics: to begin with, it is ordinarily a one-to-one, face-to-face conversation; it involves individual interaction between researchers and researched. The interaction built by interview is

different from those usually found in public lectures, meetings or group discussions. Holstein (2001) suggests the relationship between researcher and researched is like a kind of friendship because of the equal and intimate conversation. Livingstone(2010) points out that interviews adapt the way of "research with" rather than "research on" interviewees, it seems to be more personalized and humane. The second and the most important aspect is it is usually deep-going. The questions should not as simple as 'which magazine do you read?' or 'how often do you read it?', they are much more complicated. It is conducted on the basis of individual matters; for instance, interviewee themselves, cultural knowledge, personal experiences and opinions. Interview is a useful and effective way for researchers, which enables them to investigate the root driver of interviewees' certain actions and their interpretations towards different circumstances. Lastly, interview is commonly used in addition to other methods or collaborate with them to collecting data.

David Morley uses interview method and applies Stuart Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model (He claimed that a message cannot be regarded as a ball which is passed on one by one simply, it should be understood as a process which the program producer encode it and the audience decode it) to the empirical studies. Morley (1980) researches the BBC(British Broadcasting Corporation) evening news program Nationwide, and the purpose of this study is to test the audiences' interpretations of television information and the different understandings related to their social classes or stratum. That is to say, through the Nationwide research, Morley tries to prove the process of meaning generated depends on the TV message and

the social structure of the audience. Morley has arranged 29 groups of audiences according to their occupation, each group had 5~10 people. These 29 groups are divided into four types: managers, students, TU officials and shop stewards. Morley made them watch two BBC evening news programs: program A was Nationwide in May 10th, 1976 and program B was a similar program in March 29th, 1977. Then he used focused interview and group interview to investigate the diverse understandings from different groups. Focused interview analyzes some specific situations of the participants, which means to understand their subjective experience, and then get the responses of them. He transformed the entire interview questions from open style to structuring type, such as 'do you think using the word to describe X is appropriate?'(Morley, 1980). He believes that focused interview conforms to the natural situations, and the more structuring questions can make the topic even more real and natural.

Morley's research provided empirical proof for Hall's encoding/decoding model and it evoked strong repercussions in the field of mass culture while also incurred a lot of comment. Some scholars think Morley's study is not very successful, because it has not broken away from the traditional empirical study which considered the social backgrounds as variable quantity. Turner (1990) criticizes the research of Morley have several drawbacks: Firstly, the community structure of the participants seems to be too simple dividing into four main categories. Moreover, the participants are not distributed in a natural situation, their interpretation are separated from the typical and real environment of television watching since general people usually watch television in the evening at home. So it is questionable

whether their interpretations are reliable. Secondly, as participants are assigned with the people in same social class to watch TV programs, their interpretation can be influenced by others in the same group; The last defect is in the the connection between television program and audiences; are the viewers willing to watch Nationwide which Morley provide to them? The television content are given by researcher instead of chosen by the audiences themselves, this situation makes the research biased. Morley (1986) also acknowledged that this research has ruined the result because of the rough supposition. Nevertheless, scholars still regard his study as an important turning-point in audience research, he transfers audience research from viewing the structure of text to exploring how the audience deal with the text, and the reformation makes a considerable impact on the development of reading ethnographic method (Moores, 1993). In the same way, Ang(2006) notes that " The Nationwide Audience has generally been received as an innovative departure within cultural studies, both theoretically and methodologically."

For Morley himself, he has profoundly awarded from the deficiencies and revised methods in his later research to respond to the criticism of this study. In 1986, Morley launched another study of audience research with interview method--Family Television. In this study, He aimed to find what affect people's viewing experience, especially the interaction between family dynamics process and television-watching behavior. At first he attempted to study on the family social location and class identification; however, he found that the principle through all the researched family is closely related to gender issue. So he began to study the gender differences impact on the

viewing practices. He chose 8 topics and selected 18 households as a sample and the researchers personally entered in these families to interview the family members. The interviews aimed at both parents and children, generally last for one to two hours. In order to leave space for thinking and asking questions, the entire interviewed process is not structured. Moreover, due to the presences of other family members, as well as the complicated interview questions, Morley was confident to get to the real interpretation. By using such a participation and observation method with interviews, Morley (1986) learned that the living-room politics heavily impact the family viewing reception so that it resulted in various viewing experiences for different family members. For these empirical differences, Morley recognizes it is not caused by the biological characteristics of men and women; however, it depends on their different social roles in family. For men, family is a leisure field, while it is more likely to be a workplace for women. Since domestic environment is constructed by gender relations, it leads to a variety of viewing experiences.

However, Stevenson (2002) maintains that although Morley's study reflects the different patterns of media in constructing social life, such life is actually surpassing the fact of the belief. In other words, Morley tends to overly emphasize the importance of audience's interpretation capacity in ideology. Although there are some criticisms, the contribution of Morley's two studies cannot be ignored. Similarly, As Tuner (1998) points out, Morley's study break through the theoretical model 'encoding/decoding' put forward by Hall (1980), Hall concerned text is the key point of the way that viewers decode the text; however, Morley focused on the social process itself of audience

watching television. Turner (1998) confirms that Morley's study directly lead us to attach importance on the social forces which produces audience, reduce attention from text and audience. It stresses more extensive study on practice and discourse of everyday life.

In summary, with facing (to) a totally unfamiliar world and objects, comprehensive and detailed descriptions are urgently needed. The holistic view and detailed fieldwork which contained by ethnography is in response to these needs. In other words, ethnography is a detailed report records the entire process and various kinds of approaches for researched. However, as all the other research methods, ethnography has its own limitation which is that not all of the social activities can be measured via participant observation or personal interviews. For instance, ethnography cannot be used to research the events of the past, it only can be carried out at present. In addition, ethnography cannot handle large-scale case study, such as large organizations or the whole country (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983). With mention to interview, it is useful and effective in collecting data, researchers can understand the experiences and perspectives through communicating with researched. Moreover, interview is also a good way to make audiences feel equal and relax. However, it is not suitable for all of the audience research. For example, it may not be able to insight into the role of the people or organizations which are outside the world of personal life of interviewees.

To conclude, as two of the most popular methods, ethnographic and interview are often used in cultural studies to explore indepth under a particular circumstances. As academic trends which grow out of specific

historical context, and with the care of individual subjectivity, cultural studies always pays close attention to powers in practice of cultural phenomenon, constructing audiences as active users of media. It places audience in the social context; therefore it breaks through the empirical audience research successfully. Even though scholars still have some controversy, the paradigm raised by the school of cultural studies really provides a different landscape of the interaction between audience and culture, which firmly establishes the characteristic status in audience research.

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