

Methodological Approaches to Reception Analysis Research in Ghanaian Media Studies

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Abstract

Reception Analysis audience research since its evolution from the German Reception Theory of the Constance School has been beset with varied methodological issues. This is stridently because reception analysis per se straddles both the humanities and the social sciences. This paper attempts to set off the methodological perspective that can enable audience researchers in the field of media studies in Africa conduct reliable and valid reception analysis research. This paper posits the qualitative method as a viable analytical tool for reception researchers. Additionally, this paper takes into consideration factors in the social systems in which media discourses are embedded. These factors enable the generation of interpretative strategies shared by individuals belonging to a specific audience group within a specified cultural context. In the light of this, these interpretative repertoires can thus serve as veritable texts that could be analyzed in reception analysis research.

Keywords

reception analysis; media reception; audience interpretative strategies; qualitative methodology; analysis-cum-interpretation



I. Introduction

Jensen (1986:15) used the term 'reception' to denote the meaning production which originates from the audience; it refers to the interaction between audience and message in its entirety. Hoiyer (1988:1) used 'reception' as a common term signifying viewers' interpretations, decodings, readings, meaning productions, perceptions or comprehension of media programs. Reception analysis may, thus, refer to studies that focus on the meaning experience that audience members derive from media content.

Hagen (1992:3) outlines the basic assumptions of reception analysis thus: audiences are regarded as active in constructing meaning from media content, its focus on meaning leads to the use of qualitative methodology in studies of empirical audiences, the meaning of media content seems to arise from the interaction between specific audiences and media content. In this situation a TV text, for instance, may be assumed to be polysemic, the concrete viewing context is assumed to be significant for the reception process, frames of interpretation are assumed to be central.

Reception analysis, further, assumes media content as a construction rather than a representation of reality and audiences contribute substantially to the social construction of reality (Jensen, 1988:3-4, Jensen, 2020). Furthermore, the medium in reception analysis is perceived as social as well as cultural. In order to communicate, the media rely on genres or conventional codes of expression. The recipients are characterized in cultural terms. The recipients of media content are conceived as a set of codes/texts to be analyzed and conferred with texts of the media.

Jensen (Jensen,1986; Jensen, 2020) points out that the reception of media content is informed by the social context. The recipient is a product of his/her social structure. In order to arrive at a theoretical anchorage of reception, it is significant to consider the forms of experience within which the reception has been socially and politically patterned.

In reception analysis it is thus relevant to take into consideration frames of interpretation and frames of reference of recipients as important, For instance, a viewer of a TV program bears with him an array of collected experiences and world knowledge including the result of other viewing experiences (Hoijer,1988;3, Hoijer, 2008). Thus, recipients of media content marshal their interpretative repertoire to understand media content. It is, therefore, the aim of reception analysis to extract these interpretative repertoire by way of in-depth interviews and content analysis of the texts of these interviews.

In order to capture the process of reception in its entirety there is the need to compare the reading of audience discourses and the media discourses. Thus, reception analysis draws on the methods of analysis-cum-interpretation from literary analysis and the cultural studies (Jensen & Rosengren, 1990). The media text is perceived as having meaning potential which is open to structural description and aesthetic interpretation by the analyst. Specific interpretations of media content must thus be couched with reference to textual characteristics such as genre conventions, the recipients' context or background characteristics. Jensen (1986) stress that it is within the context of these actualizations that the characteristics converge and become accessible for further analysis and interpretation.

The above brings into sharp focus the polysemic potential of reception. Polysemy in reception analysis may refer to the different interpretative strategies employed by different recipients to the same media discourse. It may also refer to the phenomenon where one word or sign acquires several meanings. In our case, the media text can be treated as polysemic i.e. having many potential meanings. It is the polysemic nature of the media text that enables the audiences to go beyond the 'preferred reading' (Hagen,1992:10, Jensen 2020).

The preference for a qualitative approach to reception analysis relates to the focus on meaning production by the audience. The qualitative audience interviews can show how meaning is gradually negotiated and formulated by an individual recipient or in the interplay between several recipients in a group (Jensen,1986:72,Dahler-Larsen, 2008). The qualitative content analysis is also better oriented towards explaining meaning with reference to textual interrelations.

II. Review of Literatures

2.1 Qualitative Versus Quantitative

Qualitative science questions the explanatory power of conventional empirical approaches within the social sciences. The emerging consensus amongst academics points to the inadequacy of hypothetico-deductive methods in examining many central issues in the social sciences. The reason being that qualitative research places its emphasis on the role of human language, consciousness and cultural practice in everyday social practices in terms of media research.

The quantitative methodology differs in its mode of enquiry from the qualitative method. The background to the two modes of enquiry lies respectively in the humanities and the natural sciences or in the German terms – GEISTESWISSENSCHAFTEN AND NATURWISSENSCHAFTEN:

QUALITATIVE

Meaning
Internal
Occurrence
Experience
Exegesis
Process

QUANTITATIVE

Information
External
Recurrence
Experiment
Measurement
Product

There are four analytical levels for the distinction between qualitative and quantitative methods:

1. Object of analysis
2. The analytical apparatus or methods (collecting, registering and categorizing of data: the concrete operations of enquiry)
3. The methodology
4. The theoretical framework. (Jensen, 2020; Creswell, J.W. & Creswell, J.D., 2018)

The medium of quantitative analysis is numbers and their numerical correlations. The medium of qualitative analysis is human language expressing the concepts of everyday experience as they pertain to a specific context. The purpose of each medium depends on the purpose and area of enquiry. Jensen & Jankowski (1991) noted that qualitative researchers demonstrate that decontextualization of discursive meanings is precisely a key problem for the study of human communication. Thus the qualitative methodology employed by a researcher may refer to the “structured sets of procedures and instruments by which empirical phenomena of mass communication are registered, documented and interpreted” (Jensen & Jankowski, 1991:8, Jensen, 2020, Dahler-Larsen, 2008). The different methodologies give rise to distinctive modes of understanding media and to specific applications of findings in contexts of media production, education and policy (cf. Jensen & Jankowski, 1991, Jensen, 2020)

2.2 Why Qualitative Approach For Reception Analysis?

The process of meaning creation requires qualitative descriptions. The nature of the meaning process requires a qualitative approach since meaning perforce can not be quantified. The audience experience of the mass media is the general concern of reception analysis. Reception analysis sees meaning production as an unfolding process in which the audience negotiates and establishes categories of meaning (Jensen, 1986:70).

The researcher can thus use a qualitative interview approach and a qualitative content analysis of the interview transcripts as a modality of reception analysis. The object of analysis will thus be the text that is derived from the interviews. The researcher can for instance use the reception of the news genre as the point of departure for the interviews. This is with a view of problematizing the modus operandi of the qualitative interview that is generated for reception analysis. The validity of the interview process can in this way be underpinned. The interview method used for qualitative analysis and the interview guide and procedure and the units of analysis used should thus be qualitative.

III. Research Methods

The Research Design and Interview Method

As already indicated above the qualitative research approach for reception analysis requires a qualitative interview approach and a qualitative content analysis of the interview transcripts. The respondents for the reception analysis should be a limited number as a manageable number for the in-depth interviews is a requirement so that the researcher can be focused. A semi-structured interview guide can be used. The interview guide may consist of a list of themes from say a TV news programme. The qualitative interview can thus be in the form of guided conversations or discourses. One of the aims of the qualitative interviews for reception analysis is to capture contradictions in order to reflect the world of the recipients. Recipients frames of understanding and unequivocal meaning generation of media genres should be captured by the researcher. The respondents may provide answers in their own words and the accounts of the respondents are shaped by the questions asked. These questions, therefore, do form part of the discourse. The meaning of the answers to the questions will thus be negotiated in discourse. Sometimes a passive conductor of the qualitative interview is required for the researcher to establish clearly the categories for further analysis and limits of meaning.

The interview method per se can also be problematized in order to ensure the validity of the interview method used. The overall aim of these in-depth interviews is to capture the strategies of interpretation or concrete decodings of recipients. This is to enable the researcher get at how the media recipients negotiate and formulate meaning

It must be underscored that the strength of the qualitative interviews lies in their capacity for exploration and understanding meaning frames, subjective experiences and feelings. It is also a flexible tool of investigation. During the interview process the researcher can change focus and can thus develop further questions of interest. In any case, the researcher should be open to unexpected dimensions during the interview situation.

The interviews with recipients of media programmes is treated as a form of communication in reception analysis. The qualitative interview works with rather than against the conversational features of the interview. The aim of the qualitative interview is to produce valid measures of thoughts which respondents formulate and which has not necessarily been produced by them before. The interactive dimension of the interview situation may be stressed as the respondents and the interviewer interact to produce knowledge. Within the interpersonal framework of the interview, the interviewer is part of the meaning generation. The interviewer stridently contributes to the translation from practical consciousness to discursive consciousness which finally culminates in new awareness (cf, Hagen, 1992, Hoijer, 2008).

Any qualitative interview for reception analysis must be planned at three levels a) strategy b) tactics c) techniques (Gordon, 1969 quoted by Jensen, 1986). Strategy relates to the socio-psychological setting. This relates to the setting where the respondents are interviewed. Note-taking should be kept at a minimum in order for the interview to be informal and conversational as possible. An electronic recorder can thus be used as the primary tool of data collection.

The tactics relates to the selection, combination and sequencing of questions. For instance, during an interview based on a TV news programme, the first phase of the interview questions could be based on general media habits and questions about the role of TV news and TV per se in their daily lives. The second phase questions could be designed to focus on the social, political and economic dimensions of TV news viewing. At this

stage, questions relating to the credibility and relevance of TV news could be asked. Respondents could be asked to comment on the interview and their general impressions.

The techniques of the interview focus on the primary linguistic tools used for implementing the tactics. There should be an exertion to keep the types of questions asked and the vocabulary of the interview simple and informal as possible. During qualitative interviews for reception analysis, it is necessary to be aware of differences in how individuals express themselves. For example, some may be reticent and concise in their speeches (using restricted codes) in this case much is left implicit. Others may be very elaborate (using elaborate codes) in their speeches i.e. much is expressed and very little is left implicit. In this case the interviewer must listen attentively in order to enquire after things that may be implicit. Hoijer (1988) stresses that since “making conscious” is a primary purpose of the interviews there is the need to probe deeper than respondents’ immediate awareness. It is in connection with this that the techniques of probing, elaboration and silence may prove particularly useful.

Probing refers to the techniques of asking more information, supporting evidence, examples or definition of terms, clarifications to further the aims of the interview guide. Elaboration refers to the technique of repeating and recapitulating respondents’ answers and this serves to confirm their responses. It could be used if an answer is ambiguous. Lastly, the technique of Silence may be used as a means to encourage the respondents to further his argumentation.

IV. Results and Discussion

The transcripts of the interview may provide relevant units for analysis. The focus is on the discourse of the respondents about themes in media content. How the recipients cognitively structure the media content and how they apprehend media content. A kind of coding schema for delineating the ‘meaning units’ may help in the analysis of the interview transcripts in terms of:

1. The nature of mentioning of different themes
2. Deviations i.e. unconscious attribution of information from other sources other than those in the media content.
3. Thoughts and reflections – general and personal
4. Previous knowledge of subject –matter
5. Role of visuals, graphics and so on (cf. Jensen,2020, Dahler-Larsen, 2008)

The explanatory value of the interview data may be supported by methods of exemplification and argumentation. Attention should be paid to coherence, presuppositions and implicit premises in reception analysis. This is to reveal the process of argumentation by which respondents construct and negotiate meaning out of media content. So that the nature of how recipients’ argumentation evolves may be captured.

Implicit premises is based on the assumption that every assertion carries with it other assertions which can be deduced with a greater or lesser certainty by the interviewer who is linguistically and culturally competent. The implicit assertions can thus tell us something about the respondents. Coherence refers to the fact that argumentation uses cohesive devices that can be subjected to systematic analysis. For example, the functional relations between sentences may reveal the gradual process of meaning creation which constitute the respondents’ argumentation. Presuppositions refer to the linguistic signals of what the respondent takes or assumes as relatively uncontroversial basis of his arguments. It must be noted that the analysis simultaneously are interpretations. Reception analysis may reveal the cultural, linguistic and communicative competence of the reception researcher.

V. Conclusion

In the light of the above discussion this paper sets off reception analysis research as germane in terms of audience research in Ghana and by extension Africa. It was also suggested that reception analysis is circumscribed by the interdisciplinary nature of media studies. It must be stressed here that any study of media reception must also be based on a theory of signification, genre and discourse that goes beyond the mere operationalization of semantic categories. The limitations of both the humanities and the social sciences in terms of a methodological perspective was solved by putting across the importance of the qualitative method in reception analysis. This paper explained why reception researchers must appropriate this method as viable since meanings generated from consuming media content can not be quantified.

Media discourses have been perceived in this paper as generically structured discourses which are relevant for audiences in different cultural and social matrices. The social systems in which these media discourses are embedded as seen above generate interpretative repertoires shared by individuals belonging to these social contexts. Their horizons of expectations help us understand social, cultural and textual experiences which influence the reception of media texts. This resonates the cultural studies tradition which perform their analysis-cum-interpretation through methods which refer to extra-media frameworks of experience.

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