

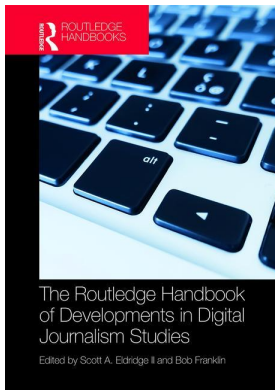
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11

DIGITAL NEWS USERS . . . AND HOW TO FIND THEM

Theoretical and methodological innovations in news use studies

Ike Picone

When we look at media use practices today, we cannot but witness how these are increasingly scattered across media, or, more precisely, across different kinds of media contents, different devices and platforms, and different socio-spatial contexts (Picone, 2016; Picone et al., 2015). The same is true for news use practices. News users are not limited to the newspaper or cable channel they are subscribed to but can access a virtually unlimited range of news sources. They do so through an ever-expanding array of connected devices. After smartphones' steep rise to prominence as a gateway to news and VR headsets' highly anticipated potential for innovative storytelling, smart speakers such as the Amazon Echo or Google Home seem the next in line to contend for people's attention.

Each of these devices comes with specific affordances that inspire novel ways for using news. For example, 'news feeds' on social media incited scrolling and skimming through news, which in turn led journalists to spice up their news titles to convince news users to click through. Short-form video, native advertising, clickbait, interactives, infographics, etc., are all examples of how news producers try to adapt journalistic products to evolving news use practices. As a result, understanding news users and the various ways in which they engage with the news has gained importance in newsrooms in recent years. In an environment where competition for people's attention increases while the share of advertising revenues decreases, the companies that best succeed in understanding the news users are believed to have the competitive advantage over the others.

Of course, circulation numbers, television ratings, and click rates have since long informed editorial decisions, but in the current media landscape, this has intensified due to the affordances of digital media. Online, news users leave much more precise traces of their doings, which can be monitored in real time through tools such as Google Analytics, Chartbeat, and Hotjar, to name but a few. Editorial analytics, "systematic analysis of quantitative data on various aspects of audience behaviour aimed at growing audiences, increasing engagement, and improving newsroom workflows" (Cherubini and Nielsen, 2017: 7), are finding their way into newsrooms. As a result, journalists and editors can witness how their audiences react on news items as they happen, leading to situations where they alter titles of badly performing articles or boost others amongst relevant target audiences, for example.

Hence, and without ignoring the importance of market logics behind news production, the way in which people use the news forms an important driver for changes in the field of journalism. Unsurprisingly then, within journalism studies we also find a renewed interest in the way

news use practices are shaping journalism (Picone et al., 2015). This is not to say that the news audience has not been addressed in journalism studies so far. The public has been central to various scholarly debates since the cultural turn in the social sciences that advocated considering how people give meaning to news in the study of journalism. Important debates revolved around the distinction between what people ‘need to know’ and what they ‘want to know’ (touching upon issues of tabloidization and dumbing down vs. sociocultural dimensions of popular audiences) or on the involvement of the audience in the news-making process (touching upon the democratization of the news production process) (Picone et al., 2015).

All too often, however, these debates dealt with the question of how journalists envision their public rather than with the question of how the public experiences journalism. Moreover, these discussions were informed by what scholars think the audience to be rather than by what they know it to be. Seldom were reflections on news audiences within journalism studies empirically grounded. Rather, they were normative in nature, implying how an informed citizenry should come to be. As Chris Peters (2012: 704) puts it, “we must certainly begin to speak with audiences, as opposed to just about them”, which brings us to the core of this chapter.

The news users in journalism studies

Even more than was the case before, both journalists and journalism scholars have come to acknowledge that journalism is being shaped by the way audiences use news. News use studies, both qualitative and quantitative, should then be a fundamental part of journalism scholars’ methodological toolkit, leading to a more empirically informed, less normative conception of the news audience (Picone et al., 2015). But the current evolutions in people’s news use pose challenges to the empirical study of it.

In this chapter, I explore the current conceptual and methodological advancements within news use studies that aim to tackle these challenges. I will first introduce two main challenges posed by evolving news use practices. Subsequently, I will elaborate on how these challenges urge us to rethink the way we conceptualize news audiences on the one hand and to adopt new research methodologies on the other hand. On a conceptual level, we draw from audience studies and science and technology studies to propose an academically grounded conceptualization of the news (media) user. On a methodological level, we look for inspiration amongst the (digital) methods that are being explored in fields such as time use studies and technology adoption studies.

Grasping the news users: challenges ahead

Where journalists have a hard time keeping up with adapting their journalistic output to the many channels and devices through which news users access the news, user researchers are equally struggling to grasp the digital news user and the nuances of news use practices. The challenges can be summarized in this way: (1) how to follow news users across media and (2) how to encompass the nuances in news use.

How to follow news users across media

Before the advent of digital media, there used to be a tight relationship between a medium and its content. Audiovisual content, for instance, was related to television and cinema, while written content was related to newspapers and books. This also implied a relatively concrete focus for studying the users of these media: studying news viewers meant a focus on viewing news broadcasts in the living room, studying newspapers meant a focus on someone reading news articles on the sofa or while commuting (Courtois et al., 2013).

Now, print and audiovisual content can be consumed through a wide range of other devices such as laptops, tablet computers, or smartphones, introducing news use in different socio-spatial contexts. As news practices are scattered across media outlets and devices, so is the researcher's focus. Where do you find news readers? Behind a computer on their desk, behind a tablet, a smartphone, a smartwatch, and soon maybe even a smart refrigerator or table? And on those devices, they might be reading a digital newspaper, but equally updates from a news app, links shared on social media, books, etc. In turn, those apps and updates might contain video and audio fragments as well, hence making news readers viewers and listeners at the same time. So, a first challenge for news use researchers is following news users as readers, viewers, listeners, etc., across all the media devices, outlets, and platforms through which they access the news.

How to encompass the nuances in news use

Because of the wide adoption of connected devices, media are now ubiquitous: news is available 24/7, wherever you are. Mark Deuze (2012) argues that media are increasingly so ubiquitous and pervasive that they become transparent through our daily use of them. A good example is the way in which many media users come across news stories while checking social media. They are not purposefully looking for news at that time. News updates are another example: it might literally take but a glance at the notification center of your smartphone or smartwatch to see news. Checking the news is then not always a well-defined activity in our daily routine but rather an action that takes place in those in-between moments of free time when we reach for our mobile devices in anticipation of our next activity (Dimmick et al., 2011: 25).

How can a researcher interpolate news users about such practices when they are gone before one even realizes? Checking the news on the go, at a glance, or in between moments is so volatile that it almost slips one's consciousness and, indeed, becomes 'transparent'. As a result, these actions are not only difficult to observe but also difficult for respondents to recollect, both posing a challenge for user research. How then to encompass the many nuances in peoples' everyday news use, and what level of granularity is required when taking a closer look at news use practices?

In sum, news flows are more intricate than ever, intertwining professional and collaborative information production; journalistic, social, and individual news selection; and private and public, sedentary and nomadic news use. As a result, grasping the digital news user as he or she flows through different news settings grows more complex, especially from a methodological point of view.

If we want to empower news use researchers in the future to equip themselves with adequate means to tackle these challenges, we will need to innovate along both theoretical and methodological lines. The methods we use to gather empirical data are intertwined with the conceptual lens through which we look at new phenomena. This lens focuses on the questions we want to find an answer to and, in turn, the methods that will allow us to find those answers.

Hence, I will first address these challenges on a theoretical level in the next section, developing the notion of 'news users' in a way that allows us to conceptually grasp people using news across media. Subsequently, I will explore promising avenues in user research that can inspire methodological advancements. Based on this exploration, I will propose a series of guiding principles for methodological innovation in news use studies.

Theoretical advancement in news use studies: conceptualizing the digital news user

So far in this chapter, I have been talking about media users, or more precisely news (media) users. But who are we talking about exactly? In media studies, they have long been known as 'the

audience’, but “[i]t becomes clear that the range of practices and habits associated with the term ‘audience’ have diversified to the extent that questioning the usefulness of the term audience seems justified (yet again)” (Madianou, 2009: 343). Both media researchers and professionals have come to talk about ‘users’ when addressing people in relation to media. This seems to have happened almost intuitively, as if ‘the user’ simply felt like a better match than ‘the audience’. Carpentier (2011: 113) explains the popularity of the denominator, at least partially, “by its capacity to emphasize online audience activity, where people use media technologies and content more actively”.

Of course, the influence of disciplines such as human–computer interaction, internet studies, and science and technology studies in positioning the notion of user is undeniable. Closer to media studies, the ‘uses and gratifications’ (U&G) tradition and later the work of Roger Silverstone have been essential in introducing the user to audience studies. Numerous studies have traced everyday media use practices and how they have expanded across media, resulting in a

rich terminology [to] outline changes in patterns of audience practices [that originated] in a strong urge to develop new conceptual frameworks in order to be able to map, explain, and understand the complex audience practices which may all, in various ways, be characterized as ‘cross-media’.

(Bjur et al., 2014: 16)

By intuitively, however, I mean that the adoption of the term ‘user’ within media studies was not accompanied by an in-depth theoretical and conceptual exploration and argumentation about why we should address audience members as media users. The adoption of the term ‘user’ and its suitability have been debated in audience studies, but so far without a decisive answer. Audience researchers themselves remain divided about the matter (Picone, 2017).

I would however suggest that we can think of a theoretical rather than a pragmatic argumentation in favor of ‘news user’ as a concept that allows us to better grasp the digital news user moving across media. These argumentations revolve around three analytical arguments: the term ‘news user’ being (1) medium-agnostic, allowing users to be understood as they cross from one device or source to another within their whole media repertoire; (2) scalable, allowing people to be addressed simultaneously as individuals with very personal ways of using media and as members of global audiences; and (3) nonlinear, considering audience members as more than merely receivers of content. These arguments are strongly informed by and at the same time giving direction to current approaches to cross-media use. Concepts like ‘media repertoires’, ‘worthwhileness’, and ‘situational context’ will recur throughout the arguments being made.

‘Media user’ is medium-agnostic

First, ‘media user’ is a medium-agnostic term: It does not require defining people in relation to a specific type of media device or media practice. Contrary to ‘the reader’ or ‘the viewer’, ‘media user’ considers people turning to a whole repertoire of media sources and devices (Hasebrink and Domeyer, 2012), often simultaneously. For example, data from the 2015 Reuters Institute Digital News Report shows that already in 2015, a key global trend is that ever more people are using two or three devices to access the news, with smartphones and tablets specifically “extending our access points [and] making us more connected to the news at home and on the move” (Newman et al., 2015: 8). The notion of media user – and not ‘medium’ user for that matter – lets us take this reality into account.

While the study of individual modes of media consumption remains relevant, it becomes equally important to look at the cross-media combinations that people select and why they do so (Hasebrink and Domeyer, 2012). At the same time, the notion of media use accommodates

under a single term the whole range of media practices that media users can undertake via their media repertoire, from watching, reading, or listening to sharing, commenting, and posting content. Employing ‘media user’ permits researchers to address audience members in their capacity as people performing a whole range of practices through a whole range of devices and sources. At the same time, the notion can be narrowed down when necessary. ‘News (media) users’, for example, refers to people consulting the news in different forms over different platforms and devices. ‘Tablet users’ delineates the users of that specific artifact but still encompasses all the different forms of content people can use it for.

‘Media user’ is scalable

Second, in contrast to, for example, the audience, the user has a singular and plural form, which makes the concept more scalable. Audience has, of course, also been used in its plural form, especially in relation to the encoding/decoding approach and how it leads to sub-publics that ‘read’ content in different ways (Hall, 1980); however, it cannot account for the truly individual and personalized forms that media use can take today. Over a decade ago, Livingstone (2003: 348) argued that the notion of a user “tends to be overly individualistic and instrumental, losing the sense of a collectivity which is central to ‘the audience’”. But in a digital media environment characterized by information abundance and convergence, users increasingly spread their media consumption across multiple platforms, thus creating their own “personal information space” (Deuze, 2007: 30–33). “[T]he particular constellation of media on which one individual draws may be quite different than another’s” (Couldry et al., 2007: 190–191). One could even argue that there are virtually as many media constellations as there are media users (Schröder and Larsen, 2010).

By talking about the media user we can consider the very individual level of media use, while the plural form still allows us to refer to the ‘sense of collectivity’ that is traditionally associated with the notion of audiences. Speaking of media users in plural still permits us to refer to people as a group, sharing common features or experiences, be it in what sources they consult (TV series, games, etc.), how (on TV, on a smartphone, etc.), when (in real time, postponed, etc.), where (at home, commuting, etc.), and with whom (family, friends, social media, etc.), or in the combination of these elements (e.g. the live television audience of “Britain’s Got Talent” or the worldwide group of Apple aficionados).

‘Media user’ is nonlinear

Third, the notion of the media user deals with the linear relationship among production, text, and audience that has been haunting the mass communication tradition for decades. The signifier ‘audience’ both etymologically and historically implies an endpoint in the media infrastructure, the moment where the message is ‘heard’. ‘User’ does not have this connotation. People can ‘use’ media to consult information; comment on or share it; and produce their own or remix, redistribute, or in any other form repurpose content, and by doing all this give meaning to the content and devices adopted. Media technologies are shaped not before but because they are used by people in their everyday lives (Silverstone, 2006). ‘Media user’ incorporates that idea and acknowledges the active part that ‘ordinary’ people play in shaping media’s role in society.

Other terms like ‘producer’ (Bruns, 2008) have also been proposed in this regard, but the advantage of ‘user’ is twofold. First, terms like ‘producer’ imply that media users produce information ‘by definition’. From a theoretical perspective, we should surely encompass the ‘productive’ potential of media practices but not at the cost of eclipsing the ‘consumptive’ one. Most people still mainly engage in merely consuming media. Speaking of the user allows us to include both

dimensions, as somebody can use media to watch a film or to write a review about it. Second, ‘user’ incorporates consumptive and productive dimensions without implying an “analytical collapse between producers and users” often suggested in the literature (Bechmann and Lomborg, 2013:778). Individual users can engage in various acts of ‘self-publication’ in which they produce (bits of) information, but looking at the media system from an economic perspective still requires distinguishing end users from professional producers, as their roles are still distinct when it comes to value creation.

In sum, I propose to conceptualize news users both as individuals as well as social groups, actively engaging with news media through a variety of socio-spatial contexts of news use (see also Picone, 2016), addressing ‘people in relation to media’ in a more encompassing way than ‘audience’ ever could. It gives audience researchers a term that, at its most abstract theoretical level, is inclusive of the many emanations of their object of study. The term overcomes traditional tensions in audience studies in a way that turns this intuitively useful word into an analytically valuable concept. How then can this conceptual base inform the way in which we seek new methods in news use studies?

Methodological advancements in news use studies: pathways toward methodological innovation

Starting from the conceptual base already laid out, we can consider a set of guiding principles for methodological innovation in news use studies that could help researchers follow users across media and encompass the nuances of news use. We will explore current methodological innovations beyond the field of journalism studies as an inspiration for future directions in news use studies.

First, if we want to study people’s news experience, we need to take the whole media repertoire into account. The specific constellation of people’s news diet is constituted by what people perceive to be worthwhile to pay attention to in a specific situation (Schröder and Kobbernagel, 2010: 116). News competes with various other possible occupations, ranging from skimming through social media to playing games. But also within one’s news repertoire, various types of news content and platforms compete for news users’ attention. Focusing on news repertoires forms a more holistic approach, where the study of news use is embedded into the study of media repertoires.

Second, this variation in the constellation of media repertoires is amplified even further because media content can be consumed ‘anywhere, anytime’, increasing the importance of situational factors in shaping people’s media experience. News use studies should consider the socio-spatial context of news use to answer the question when and where specific news channels are given a more prominent role within news repertoires. This requires methodologies that consider where and when news is used and how it is rooted in people’s daily lives.

Adopting these principles offers the advantage of studying news as it is actually rather than presumably or preferably used. News reaches us through various platforms throughout the day. Every platform will have intrinsic affordances that appeal to specific persons. And every situation lends itself to certain practices more than others, affecting how people experience the media they use in that situation. The more news becomes a cross-platform experience, the more these affordances will become relative to the affordances of other news media and relative to the situation they are used in. Previous research on channel repertoires has shown that the availability and access of media can be more significant predictors of media repertoires than individual demographics or content preferences (Taneja et al., 2012).

Looking at methodological advancements beyond journalism studies, where can we find interesting methodologies that adhere to these principles?

Time use research

Time use research, although a well-established field of research, offers a first interesting quantitative pathway for methodological innovation. At its core, time use research “describes the allocation of time among various circumstances and subjective states []. It can provide measures of the extent, durations, and purposes of access to leisure activities, or of information technology use” (Gershuny, 2011: 4).

Traditionally, time use research uses diary surveys to register the sequence of activities people perform during the day: from a list of possible activities, people are asked to select which activities they did when and for how long during the day, usually complemented by where they did it, with whom, what accompanying activities they were engaging in, and how they felt about it.

Media use is one of the categories of activity. Recently, researchers have stepped away from device-focused definitions such as ‘watching TV’ or ‘listening to the radio’ to defining activities on the level of the sensory experience, i.e., listening, watching, reading, communicating, gaming, and surfing (see Sonck and Pennekamp, 2014). Each of these broad categories is subdivided into more specific ones, like listening to a radio program or watching a television series, asking in more detail about the format of media use. Every time a respondent registers a media activity, he or she is prompted to answer two consecutive questions: what device was used for the activity and what kind of content was consulted. As a result, an example of a possible registered activity would be reading, more specifically reading news, more precisely news headlines (content) via tablet (device).

An important plus of time use research is it being media-agnostic by adopting the activity as the object of analysis and probing for device and content on a secondary level. Decoupling activity, content, and device, each of which is registered independently but always in relation to time and place, allows shifting our focus depending on the questions to be tackled. When it comes to news, we can get a picture of when and where people consult news, irrespective of the device they use to do so. Or we can focus on a specific news genre and look at the situations that genre is consumed in most of the time.

Second, time use research enables researchers to follow individual respondents across the various daily situations in which they turn to news media. News use is not bound to occur in a specific setting. The news can be accessed at home, at work, on the go, etc. Time use research takes this into consideration, as it does not only probe the time dimension but also simultaneous activities and where and with whom these occur.

A related advantage is that time use research can be considered “non-media centric” (Krajina et al., 2014). By looking at time spent, time use research does approach media use in relation to media users’ other daily activities and routines. It does not only allow positioning news repertoires in the larger perspective of media repertoires but media use in turn as part of people’s daily activities and routines. This enables researchers to go beyond the relationship between users and media to find correlations between media use and other aspects of life like the availability of leisure time, commuting patterns, etc.

An obvious caveat of time user research, and by extension all forms of survey research, is the inevitable limitation of self-reporting. Media use research primarily uses data that are gathered, be it in a quantitative or qualitative way, by asking people to report what they do, think, feel, or experience. The issues that have been associated with this form of data collection, like retention bias, socially desirable responding, or flawed self-assessment, are regarded as a necessary evil. Researchers have traditionally turned to data triangulation techniques to minimize these shortcomings.

When faced with the challenge of how to encompass the nuances of news use in an information-saturated, always-connected context, the issue of self-reporting becomes even more pressing. As we already mentioned, a lot of interactions with the news through mobile or social media are

very volatile, taking place in between our daily activities. Hence, it becomes difficult for news users to consciously single out when they are interacting with the news. Imagine having to recall precisely all the news articles, videos, updates, alerts, etc., you consumed over the past few hours, where, and on which device. Here, a lot is expected from tracking or logging users through mobile devices, another avenue for methodologic innovation.

Tracking and logging studies

As mentioned, newsrooms are increasingly reliant on editorial analytics, tools that provide them with unfiltered, real-time data about their readers to inform their editorial decisions. But academics are also considering the use of tracking tools in various ways, developing specific apps to enable this (see also Ørmen, this volume, Chapter 10).

One option is integrating tracking options in mobile diaries. Within time user research, for example, researchers are developing smartphone apps that allow tracking and logging what people do on their smartphone. Instead of participants having to report the news sites and apps they have been using, such a tracking app can register which apps and sites were consulted, what information was accessed on these apps and sites, when, and for how long, and even, using GPS data, where participants used which piece of news information. Participants can then still review, edit or complement that information in the diary app. Also, participants can be prompted with extra questions once a specific action is registered. Imagine someone checking a news alert being prompted with an on-screen question ‘Did you find this news alert useful?’.

A digital diary tracking tool offers many advantages: by tracking and logging people’s media use, you tackle the issue of reporting the nuances of small acts of news consumption. These log data can be analyzed as part of a quantitative analysis of a large sample of users or can be used to elicit reflections from participants in a qualitative research setup (see later). Also, the activities registered are supplemented with accurate and reliable time (including frequency and duration) and location (via GPS) information. This allows researchers to obtain a precise view on the context in which news is consulted. These apps have the potential to integrate algorithmic functions that could identify someone’s specific location, by connecting GPS information to existing databases such as Google Maps, or translate moving patterns (e.g. moving at high speed) into activities (e.g. commuting). Furthermore, as health monitoring apps like Apple Health have already shown, the sensory data that smartphones and smart watches collect can also serve to assess one’s level of physical activity, sleep, stress, etc. – all data that news use studies could potentially tap into.

These tracking tools hold a large potential for news use studies, but they are not sanctifying, either. Following user across media remains a challenge, as these apps can track smartphone use but not television use or radio use. This is a big concern for audience metric companies such as Nielsen, which has developed a total audience metric aimed at measuring the viewership of programs combined over cable TV, on demand services, connected TV devices, mobile, PC, and tablets. Such metrics require companies to include tracking code in their various offline and online channels. When Nielsen rolled out its total audience metric at the end of 2016, NBC Universal issued critical remarks on the service, showing that issues of comparability and implementation of such systems remain.

As our media use continues to shift from analog to digital, we leave behind ever more traces of our media use. These traces offer an opportunity for news use researchers to grasp the nuances in people’s digital news use. Even if often still very costly, they can develop their own tools for this purpose, a field where much room for improvement through interdisciplinary collaboration is still available. A larger issue, however, is one of openness or academic researchers’ access to private data. A lot of traces of digital (news) media consumption are already being tracked by news companies on their news channels and by intermediaries such as internet/cable/connected TV/

social media providers on their platforms. Because of the commercial value of these data, players are reluctant to share them with researchers – or with any other player. Hence, a big challenge remains for news use researchers to collaborate with private companies for the analysis of these data. However, these data are often so sizeable and complex that even if granted access, the question for social scientists remains how to analyze these data in any meaningful way.

Connected and semi-experimental ethnography

When our news use becomes highly traceable, it is tempting to assume that we might obtain a complete understanding of it by analyzing quantitative data. But an equally interesting pathway for methodological innovation can be pursued along the lines of qualitative, ethnographic approaches to the study of news use. Inductive, interpretative approaches remain valuable.

Media ethnography, too, is confronted with the issues already touched upon. Historically, ethnography takes bounded spaces or delineated situations as its methodological starting point. But how can media ethnographers define the locus of news use practices when these are scattered over an ever-expanding and more mobile digital media repertoire accessible anytime, anywhere?

News use can take place on different crossroads between public and private, virtual, and physical spheres, meaning that the media ethnographer would need to be present at, or at least have access to, these crossroads, which is not self-evident. Participant observation seems difficult, as it would imply that participants would be virtually stalked by the researchers as they consult media at home, on the train, at work and even in between times. Both in terms of the researchers' effort and of invasiveness into the participant's life, this is obviously not feasible. How to proceed with media ethnography, then?

Part of the answer is offered by danah boyd (2015) when she proposes finding different entry points into a phenomenon by following relations between people and practices by envisioning relations between persons, spheres, and objects instead of approaching those elements in isolation from each other. She has further developed this approach for the study of technology-mediated everyday practices in what she calls a 'connected field sites' protocol. Boyd's protocol (2015) includes participant-observations of online and offline practices, 'deep hanging out' in physical spaces where the practices occur, and semi-structured face-to-face interviews. This offers a good starting point for the ethnographic study of news use, scattered and volatile as it is today.

To further address the issue of news use being invisible to the observer's eye, a semi-experimental approach can be considered. For example, tracking tools and (online) diaries can be introduced in an ethnographic setting to follow people moving through private spheres or to grasp ephemeral moments of news consumption. Here, tracking tools serve not so much to gather data to be analyzed as such but rather data that can be used as part of elicitation techniques during in-depth interviews. Also, setting up a tracking procedure does not always require a full-fledged online diary app. Thinking creatively, a lot can already be achieved by querying the APIs of social networks through tools such as IFTTT (if this then that).

For example, if you would want to track the links that a participant shares on Facebook, it would suffice to ask them to connect their account to IFTTT for you to obtain a continuously updated Google sheet containing the links and their publication time. Researchers can tap into these data to surface specific moments or actions during the interview for participants to reflect upon. For example, confronting a participant's view on her news use with her actual behavior as reflected in track logs can foster interesting reflections from her side during the interview.

In certain circumstances, researchers can go even further in adopting an experimental approach. As already mentioned, while journalism is still getting accustomed to the steep rise of mobile devices, the next wave of voice-driven, home-based smart assistants is already on its way.

Especially from a more applied research perspective, questions arise about the adoption of these kinds of technologies for the use of news. Often, researchers turn to lead users to get a sense of how new technologies might be adopted and how new use practices might develop. An important disadvantage of such lead-user research in terms of news use is that these are often tech-savvy, news-oriented persons whose ways of using news are hardly predictive for regular news users' engagement with the news. Think of bloggers, for example, and how the large majority of news users left blogging aside.

Here, *living lab* methodology (Schuurman et al., 2011) and *proxy technology assessments* (Lievens et al., 2008) offer interesting ways forward. These methodologies introduce new technological artifacts or services in real-life settings. Their uses are then studied through qualitative, digital data-gathering methods. Living labs can be described as “environments for innovation and development where users are exposed to new ICT solutions in (semi)realistic contexts, as part of medium- or long- term studies targeting evaluation of new ICT solutions and discovery of innovation opportunities” (Følstad, 2008: 116). In proxy technology assessments, the technology introduced is conceived as a proxy for a possible future technology. For example, you are wondering how news users would engage with an all-you-can-eat online news subscription. In the absence of such service, you could present participants with an account on Blendle, a pay-per-article service, which is then linked to a pay card from the research project.

Digital news users . . . and how to find them

News is ‘anytime, everywhere’, and so are news users. On mobile devices and social media platforms, important parts of people’s news consumption become unintentional and volatile, even if, ironically, it can be traced in detail. In such a context, finding and following news users and understanding all the nuances of news use is challenging. In this chapter, I have explored both conceptual and methodological ways to tackle this challenge. Rather than pledging to offer ready-made solutions, I propose guiding principles and possible pathways along which news use researchers can further develop suitable methodologies in a constructive and creative way.

When putting people at the center and following them across different contexts and devices and consulting various forms of content, it is difficult to hold on to the notion of audience. The term ‘media user’ is more versatile and allows people to be addressed in their different capacities as watchers, readers, listeners, communicators, commenters, posters, sharers, etc., simultaneously. The successful new methods for studying active news use will be those that can grasp news users in as many of their capacities as possible.

Further readings

This chapter draws on and synthesizes some of the ideas developed in previous articles. I address conceptual and methodological advancements in news use studies in the article “Grasping the Digital News User. Conceptual and Methodological Advances in News Use Studies” (2016). When it comes to the specific strands of methodological innovation, a few works offer interesting starting points for further readings. The article of Joeri Minnen et al. (2014) *Modular Online Time Use Survey (MOTUS) – Translating an Existing Method in the 21st Century* provides insights into time use research; Jakob Ohme et al.’s (2016) article “Exposure Research Going Mobile: A Smartphone-Based Measurement of Media Exposure to Political Information in a Convergent Media Environment” gives an overview of tracking and logging studies; danah boyd develops the notion of connected ethnography in the book chapter “Making Sense of Teen Life: Strategies

for Capturing Ethnographic Data in a Networked Era”, whereas I explore the idea of semi-experimental ethnography in the article “Situating Liquid Media Use: Challenges for Media Ethnography” (2013).

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