How to Study Human Routine Actions

Reflections from a Survey Pilot Study of Families'
Social Use of Media

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Through a "Call for partners" mediated through colleagues who knew the topic was central to our research interests, we became involved in a Cross-Cultural Research Project on Media Use in Families.[1] The aim of the project was to study how the social uses of television in the family vary according to culture and media environment. Later the multinational research project was developed to include families social use of other media as well.[2]

Being part of an international project is interesting in many ways besides holding the potential for cross-cultural comparison. We want to use this paper as an opportunity to reflect upon our experiences from being part of a cross-cultural project. We will try to make general methodological reflections based on the survey pilot study we did in Norway as part of the international project.[3] The design of the study actualises several questions related to how a phenomenon such as media habits can be fruitfully studied. We understand people's media use as human routine actions; meaningful behaviour that is habitual and taken for granted like the vast bulk of activities in our everyday lives (cf. Giddens, 1991/84). Especially we want to focus on how appropriate the approach was for the intended purposes and questions related to validity.

The Cross-Cultural Project

How is media use integrated into people's family lives? This was one of the main questions of concern in the Cross-Cultural Project. According to the project initiators Nossek and Tidhar (1994a), the

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multi-channel situation has changed family viewing patterns. The survey pilot study was aimed to focus on patterns of social use of TV and other media in families with access to multi-channel TV technologies. The following research questions had been formulated for the study: "Do families with different duration's of access to multi-channel TV technologies differ in the consumption of TV and other media, and in the social uses of these media? Are there variations in patterns of consumption related to TV and other media that can be accounted for by distinct family characteristics? Are patterns of social uses of TV and other media in families (with access to multi-channel television technologies) universal or culturally bound?" Lull's well-known typology of the social uses of TV was taken as the point of departure for the study (see Lull, 1980; 1990).

In his writings, Lull regards TV as a valuable resource available to the family to regulate social activities, both structural and relational ones. Structural use can be divided into environmental factors such as background noise and companionship, and regulative factors such as the punctuation of time and activity. Among the structural uses of TV, Nossek and Tidhar (1995) had included family activities such as regulating viewing time, decision making processes related to program choice, and the enactment of parental control in viewing situations (see also, Lull 1990). Relational use refers to the way audience members use TV to create practical social arrangements. Relational uses are divided into four types of interaction: communication facilitation between family members, affiliation and avoidance, social learning, and use of TV for displaying competence or dominance. The questionnaire used in the pilot study was organised as an

operationalization of these dimensions in Lull's typology.

The design originally planned to use both a quantitative and a qualitative approach, containing a survey and in-depth interviews. However, during the development the qualitative part of the project was abandoned.[4] Thus, the point of departure for our discussion is the survey. The questionnaire, was as mentioned based on Lull`s typology of social uses of television.[5] It was however decided to include other mass media as well in the already designed questionnaire. We will return to how this worked out later in the paper.

Our communication with the projects initiators and the other members of the research team was mostly through e-mail. We now realise that mediated communication is not sufficient and cannot replace face-to-face interaction. A meeting before the pilot study could have helped us clarifying the intentions of the project in general and the intentions behind the questions in particular. In our case, the dilemma was that we could not change too much from the English-language questionnaire – except for translation and some adaptation to Norwegian conditions – if we were to be part of the cross-cultural comparison. Circumstances like this led to disadvantages that we recommend others to avoid if they are to do cross-cultural research projects.[6]

The Survey Pilot Study

Two criteria lay the premises for our pilot sample; the families should have had access to cable or satellite TV for minimum one year, and there should be at least one parent and one child under 18 years living together.[7] Since this was "only" a pilot study, our respondents were selected through a social network procedure. Thirty families were interviewed for our pilot study in Norway.[8] We were asked while conducting the pilot-study to pay attention to; 1) families' readiness to respond, 2) the length of the questionnaire and 3) clarity of question wording. Thus, we will discuss some of our experiences concerning these issues.

What first struck us when we received the questionnaire from Israel was its length and complexity. This first impression led to slight concern about getting enough respondents to participate. Our concern for recruiting respondents was not only due to the length of the questionnaire, but also to the increased tendency among people to reject interviews and questionnaires in general. There are several reasons for this increased tendency, but the extended use of surveys and interviews in marketing research with varying degrees of seriousness, disturbing people's privacy, are among factors that may give rise to this attitude. We started recruiting respondents through our own network, which soon revealed to be a rather slow strategy. We there changed the strategy to recruit respondents through other respondents and this procedure worked out effectively. Once willing to participate, the respondents showed a great commitment to and responsibility for providing data. The interviews lasted on average one and a half hour. The interviews were conducted in the respondents' home, except for three interviews which were conducted at the respondents' workplace.

Concerning clarity of question wording, we found great variance in how the respondents understood the questions. During the translation and adaptation process we not only shortened the questionnaire as a whole, but rewrote some of the questions. Again the dilemma of changing the questionnaire too much threatens the potential for cross-cultural comparison. The rewriting was mainly done to lower the level of abstraction and complexity and to exchange academic wording with more everyday language. However, rewriting the questions did not remove all misunderstandings and unclear questions. One such unclear question in the survey was: "How often does it happen that adults and children in your family use information from the media to solve problems with the children?" A possible double meaning of this question was revealed. The question can either be understood as; 1) Using information from media to solve a problem together *with* the children, or 2) Using information from media to solve problems *involving* the children. Moreover, we feel that this question requires a considerable level of consciousness regarding one's use of media. This made it difficult for some of the respondents to answer. Whether people are conscious enough regarding their media use to answer a question like this is a matter of debate.

The following response from a respondent illustrates such a problem; "I don't know ....it might be more often than that... I just don't know....put sometimes". In short, the respondents' difficulty with answering were due to: 1) not understanding what was asked for, 2) not being able to answer due to lack of awareness concerning media use, 3) difficulty with answering on behalf of other family members.

Methodological Reflections: How do the Respondents Answer?

What kind of answers are we looking for? Are we interested to uncover, if possible, families' actual

use of media? Or do we want to find out how families think they use media? These are essential questions that need to be discussed while designing the questionnaire. Further, how conscious can we expect people to be about their use of mass media? Are we conscious enough about our use of mass media to assess, for example, to what extent we learn about gender roles from the radio?

Consider the question; "To what extent is your family schedule (i.e. meal times, bed times etc.) influenced by media activities?" What is meant by the term "influence"? Is a delayed dinner a good example of media influence? What if eating dinner while viewing TV, by the family is considered daily routine? What if earlier influences now have become part of the daily routine? How far should the respondent be asked to trace back changes in their daily routine? And not to forget, what is considered normal, uninfluenced routines?

In the Cross-Cultural Questionnaire some questions dealt with immediate talks and delayed talks about behaviours and values presented in media. Our problem was; what is meant by the terms behaviour and values, and how can you separate the two? Further, how to translate these terms – as they are not part of everyday language in Norway – without loosing the intentions. The questionnaire also contained a question about immediate and delayed talks related to media content. How can the question about content be answered without including both behaviour and values? If the term content includes the two other terms, and respondents do not separate them, there is a risk that the different questions give the same answer. Further, if the question wording is too academic and unfamiliar their usefulness is lost. The problem was that some questions were too close to the researchers' interests: thus, they were formulated in a rather academic language as opposed to everyday language. When a respondent find it difficult to answer, the chances of random answering increases. The type of response referred to above does not just reveal a dilemma for the respondent, but creates a coding problem for the interviewer as well.

Concerning coding problems, responses like the ones above give the interviewer several opportunities. Should the interviewer start asking probing questions, hoping to get more exact answers, or should (s)he be satisfied with the answer the respondents give? Whether the interviewer chooses the first solution or the second, the consequences will be either a threat to the standardisation of the survey or its validity. The problem with coding is not entirely due to unclear question wording, but to a general lack of interviewer instructions. We will provide some illustrative examples of questions that were problematic. The survey contained questions such as: "To what extent are there regular times in which adult members in your family get together to watch TV?" and "To what extent do specific programs or special content bring together adults in your family in order to watch TV?". The problem here is how to separate regular times and specific programmes. In our pilot we combined these two questions, because a regular viewing time can refer to a specific program. An example can be the news, which is broadcasted at regular times with a specific content.

As mentioned earlier all mass media was included in the questionnaire. To include all mass media in a survey originally designed for TV gives rise to a new set of problems. That the questionnaire was based on Lull's typology of social use of television, creates a relevancy problem for other media, print media in particular. For example, the following question: "How often does it happen in your family that one adult imposes his choice of content on other adults in each of the following media?" We experienced a problem regarding the issue of imposing one's choice of content on other family members. While people probably seldom impose their choice of content in a book or newspaper on someone in the use situation, the one who makes the choice for what books to buy or newspapers to subscribe to, lay the premises.

In the original questionnaire there was no question about the child imposing his or her choice of content on others. We assume that the reason is that the questionnaire was developed in a culture where children might have a more subordinate role than we believe they have in an egalitarian culture like Norway. In the Norwegian version this question was therefore included: "How often does it happen in your family that a child imposes his or her choice of content on adults in each of the following media?" We found that this was often the case.

A general impression of the questionnaire was that it tried to cover too many aspects of families media use, resulting in complex and abstract questions. We know from literature on methodology and earlier experience that respondents tend to answer any type of questions, even those they do not understand. Respondents have less fear of giving a meaningless answer than not being able to answer at all, or worse, admitting that they do not understand the question. The questions are by no means uninteresting, but their high level of abstraction may result in answers not grounded in reality.

In the translation process we shortened down the questionnaire. Despite of this, the questionnaire was still too long to keep both the respondents and interviewers patience. Thus, it may have resulted in more random answering at the end of the interview. When there are ambiguities in question wording or alternative ways of wording questions, the decisions about formulations of the question must be referred back to the purpose of the survey and research questions. In cross-cultural project, when questionnaires need to be translated, this can cause great challenges. Failing to meet these challenges may result in problems of validity.

Validity ad Threats to Standardization

Since questionnaires are designed to elicit information from respondents, one of the criteria for the quality of a question is the degree to which it elicits the information that the researcher desires. This criteria is validity; whether one is able to study the phenomenon one intend to study adequately. Validity concerns both methodology and findings. Methodology; whether the method is measuring what it was intended to measure, and findings; whether the results represents the phenomenon being studied. Alternative concepts have also been suggested (e.g. Kvale, 1989), like viewing validation as a process. Validation implies that one constantly checks the collection, coding, analysis and presentation of data, regarding what they say about the phenomenon. Validity concerns a study's credibility (see, Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

The similarities between a survey interview and an ordinary social conversation have been noted frequently. Bingham and Moore (1959; ref. in Bradburn & Sudman, 1983) defined the research interview as a "conversation with a purpose". However, the survey interview differs from ordinary conversations in several aspects: it is a transaction between two people who are bound by specific social norms; the interviewer offers no judgement of the respondents' replies and respondents have an equivalent obligation to answer each question truthfully and thoughtfully. Despite these social norms the standard face-to-face interview is still a social interaction. An interaction which gives the interviewer the opportunity to encourage and clarify during the interview, which for a self-administered questionnaire is not possible.

Questions in our questionnaire can be divided into two classes: those asking for behaviour and facts and those asking for attitudes. Since questions about behaviour, especially social behaviour dominates the questionnaire, the methodological reflections will be mostly about them. The demographic and factual questions are not considered either difficult or threatening and are in principle verifiable.

The fact that "watching TV" in our culture by many is considered a low status activity (see, Hagen, 1996a; 1996b), can make questions about this activity threatening for the respondent. For example, asking respondents to assess the amount of time each family member engage in media related activity may seem threatening. Further questions requiring the respondent to state how often a routine behaviour happens in the family, can cause recall problems. This is especially the case with frequent and low-salience behaviour, of which category social uses of TV easily falls. Recall difficulties can result in two types of response errors, depending on the desirability of the answer. Certain behaviours are by many seen as socially desirable, and may therefore be over-reported. To the contrary, other behaviours are seen as undesirable, and therefore under-reported.

Examples of questions that might be affected by these errors are; how often do the parents protect their children from specific programs or content in media? This may be perceived as a question containing socially desirable behaviour. And the question; to what extent is the family's daily schedule influenced by media activities? For some, to admit to such media influence in their everyday lives might be considered more socially undesirable. In our pilot study, half of the parents reported that they often protected their children from specific programs or content in media, and as much as 30 percent reported always doing this.

In their earlier study in Israel, Nossek and Tidhar (1994a) found that a longer period of cable subscription was associated with more frequent use of situations presented on TV, as a trigger to discuss problems and alternative solutions. In our pilot study, we were also interested in social learning aspects related to media. Thus, we asked to what extent the adults used information from different media to solve family problems. As much as 80 percent reported never or seldom to use information from TV to solve problems. But 10 percent said that they often used books for such a purpose. In hindsight, however, we think that the question in our culture is too negatively socially loaded to receive much positive answers.

In the survey the respondents are voluntarily participating. In general, respondents are motivated to be "good respondents" and provide the information that is asked for. At the same time, they are moti-

vated to give a good impression of themselves; in this case as good parents, hence the problem of social desirability bias.

A number of techniques have been suggested for helping the respondent's memory, without having to change the whole design. Using aided recall, making the question specific, and increase the length of the questions are some. Longer questions can help reduce the number of omitted events and thus improve recall. Thus, it may prove useful for behaviours that are considered socially undesirable, and it may increase over-reporting of socially desirable behaviours. An alternative procedure that reduces reliance on recall and thus provides more accurate information about behaviour is use of diaries. The respondent or diary keeper is asked to record events immediately after they occur, or at least on the same day. There are several examples of this procedure in media research literature. However, this procedure is costly, time consuming and have been accused of only obtaining reliable information for a single period.

Let us return to the issue of question wording. Changing the wording can change the distribution of responses. In our case, we asked the parents in the study to state how often it happened in their family that a parent grants or prohibits children from attending to media as a reward or punishment. The question was often immediately rejected with a "never happens" response. Several reasons for this response may be considered. First, it gives raise to the assumption that the question is threatening, due to the social undesirability of certain practices. Secondly, the words punishment and reward, may have negative connotations which prevented the respondent's from answering honestly. After the respondents were given a few examples of the intended behaviour, the respondents loosened up. On the whole, more than half of the parents reported that this behaviour took place in their families. Prompting by the interviewer to encourage the respondents' answer, is normally considered a threat to standardisation, and should therefore be avoided as far as possible. In our case, deliberately loading the question to decrease the under-reporting, might have been a useful strategy. Introducing the question as to indicate that the behaviour is very common, or simply assume the behaviour and therefore ask about frequencies, are among other techniques we might have profited from.

In this pilot study most respondents turned out to be women, although our intention was to interview one of the adults in the family.[9] This might have had an impact on the results. Despite policies of equality it is still mostly women who take the main responsibility for the home and for the children. Thus, one could expect that women have more insight into what is going on in the home, but this is not necessarily the case. When conducting the interviews, women were often "naturally" appointed as the informant by the rest of the family. It seemed as if she was expected to be most qualified for answering the questionnaire. An interesting question is to what extent our results would have been different if more of the respondents were men? Would their description of the family differ from the women's? And what if all family members had been interviewed? In some families where everyone was present during the interview, there was a disagreement about how much individual family members watched TV. However, the families "agreed" on it through negotiation. In families where only the respondent was present during the interview, the answer was dependent on her/him alone. It could have been interesting to interview the rest of the family members as well in order to compare the answers. We assume that family members have different perceptions about their own TV viewing and that of others.

In our study, the respondent was an informant on behalf of his or her household. You would expect that reports about others are generally less accurate than reports about the respondent's own behaviour. For example, in families with teenager children, where the children have their own radio and TV sets, the parents had difficulties assessing the amount of time their teenagers engaged in media related activity. However, if the respondents themselves are not aware of their own routine actions behaviour, information from informants may sometimes be more reliable (Sudman and Bradburn, 1982). Our respondents were parents in the family, and to some extent, capable of answering on behalf of the other parent (if any) and the children in the household. Still, as indicated earlier, what one gets is one adult's (as mentioned, mostly the women's) version of the family's social uses of media.

Thus, we consider it problematic to ask adults about children's TV experiences. However, it is quite common to ask the adults or parents about the children. In fact, most of what is said and written about children and TV is from a grown-up perspective. According to Rönnberg (1987) it is either the up-bringers', the pedagogues', the researchers' or the media producers' angle that is presented. But there is too little focus on how the child itself, who is the receiver, uses the media. This is often legitimated methodologically, since children are difficult

to interview. There is a great methodological challenge in interviewing children. First the method must be accommodated to fit the child's way of communicating, something which is both work and time consuming (see Hake, 1995). Secondly, there is doubt about children's responses regarding their own situation; children are perceived as incompetent respondents. In the pilot study we performed, children were not asked to be informants, following the international comparative project it is supposed to be a part of. This is a possible weak spot of the study since we only have answers from the adults (in our case mostly women's) about the whole family.

The point is that there were qualitative differences in the interviews where the whole family was present as opposed to only the researcher and respondent. Naturally, the interview situation is determined by predefined roles; as researcher/interviewer and respondent. There are expectations attached to these role, mostly not explicated, but still laying the premises for the interview (see Hagen, 1993). According to parts of the expectations the researcher is governing the extent and the direction of the information. The individual interview can be regarded as a process between interviewer (or researcher) and the respondent, where different degrees of trust develops through interaction, something which is determining the information achieved. Since these interviews were performed by two graduate students, it might have helped to reduce the authority sometimes attributed to the researcher.

When reflecting upon validity, the issue of translation also has to be mentioned. A problem related to translation is the connotations of a question. In different cultural contexts, a concept might refer to rather different conditions. Question formulation that is regarded rather neutral in one culture, might have different connotations in another country. This relates to what is taken for granted, the "common sense" or world view of a culture, that will differ from that of others. Such issues complicate the translation of research tools. This is particularly a problem in surveys, where standardization is often an ideal. We feel that this theme requires further reflections by researchers who aim to do cross-cultural studies.

Concluding Remarks: From Ethnographic to Statistics and Back

The questionnaire we used is, as mentioned, operationalizations of Lull's typology of social uses of TV. According to Lull (1980), it could be possi-

ble to operationalize these concepts and use them in a standardised survey. By generating quantitative scores and applying statistical tests, it may be possible to establish or modify the components of the typology into scientifically inter-correlated factors. However, this method assumes that audience members are sufficiently self-aware to recognise or gauge some rather subtle uses of the media which have been discovered ethnographically, and assumption which may not be comfortably met.

There has been a development in the field of audience research in later years, going from a quantitative dominans in effect research and in uses and gratification research, to more qualitative methods, such as in reception analysis and ethnography (see Hagen 1992; 1993). Our pilot study was part of an international project that attempted to go the other way, from ethnographic to statistics. Quantitative methods are still regarded the "queen of science" in many academic environments. However, we feel that for studying human routine actions; behaviours that are habitual and taken for granted, the survey method might be less fit than observation and more in-depth interviewing.

Moreover, we feel that since Lull's social use typology as well as the first draft of the survey was designed to understand families' TV habits, the inclusion of other media made the questionnaire more "artificial". By artificial we mean that dimensions that are important related to TV might not be equally relevant related to other media.

In addition, a number of the social uses of TV, for example using the TV as a communication facilitator, are not obvious behaviours and may never have been thought about or understood by the respondents. These unconscious influences have been termed media's "latent functions" (Katz et al., 1974) and might more easily be recovered and documented by ethnographic research. It is possible that such a phenomenon is difficult to research meaningfully in the fixed categories of a survey, where subtle nuances often are missed. If that is the case, it becomes tempting to ask what the point is, conducting a survey to reveal this particular behaviour, if other approaches may be more suited to the phenomenon?

It was a premise in our project that one adult in the household should be interviewed. We felt reluctant about such a strategy beforehand, but we feel even more strongly about the issue after having completed the pilot interviews. When it comes to evaluating more abstract phenomena, and routine actions, who gives the most correct information? One parent? Is one parent conscious and aware of

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family members routine actions? Let alone his or her own routine actions?

Furthermore, can using information from only one family member give a "complete" picture of the family's media use? Despite our conviction that a complete picture of a phenomenon under study is a positivist illusion, more voices would have given a more multi-faceted picture. According to Goodman (1983), what is important in examining the role of TV in family life is not simply the matter of studying effects on family members, focusing on individual behaviour, but rather studying the family as a whole. Interviewing one family member is therefore not sufficient, and neither is use of quantitative questionnaires alone. Goodman emphasise a multi-methodological approach, including quantitative and qualitative interviews as well as observations in order to get the best picture.

As indicated, it was unfortunate for our cross-cultural project on media use in families that the involved researchers were not able to meet face-to-face before the pilot, and thus clarify intentions and consequent adaptation and translation. We have learnt much from being part of this project, related to both project organising and method. Firstly, if questionnaires are to be translated and adapted to new cultures, researchers need to meet personally to discuss intentions. Secondly, a general rule in survey literature is not to ask questions that the respondent cannot answer. But how is one to determine what the respondent or informant cannot answer? Are families able to answer questions about their routine use of media? How can such questions be answered meaningfully – especially regarding social use which may be more subtle and unconscious.

There are many methods for researching people's media habits. For studying TV, TV meters or electronic measuring have become the main method internationally. While radio is an understudied medium, survey seems to be the main method for studying newspaper reading (cf. Høst, 1993). In order to study media use related to family life, ethnographic research methods (in-depth interviewing and observation) have recently become the norm (e.g. Lull, 1980; Morley, 1986).

The quantitative methods have their strength in mapping what media families use. Qualitative methods, on the other hand provide a chance to go more into how and why such use patterns evolve. When focusing on media use as integrated into family lives, qualitative research methods; individual and group interviews, should have been supplementing these survey findings. Questionnaires in our view, are useful for more concrete behaviour and facts. Such aspects of media use are meaningfully quantified. But when it comes to the mechanisms whereby audiences perceive and create meanings and attitudes, qualitative interview procedures are more suitable.

Notes

1. This research project has been initiated the two Israeli researchers Hillel Nossek and Chava Tidhar, see Nossek and Tidhar, 1994a og 1994b. In the "Call for partners" they invited colleagues internationally to participate in a cross-cultural study of the social implications of the introduction of cable TV.
2. Earlier the project had been labelled "Multi-channel TV Technologies and the Social Uses of TV in the Family: A Cross-Cultural Perspective".
3. This material consists of 30 interviews, 20 of them performed in Lillesand by Marianne Christoffersen and 10 performed in Nesna by Agnieszka B. Jarvoll. The interviews were carried out in the summer; mainly in June and the beginning of July, 1996. We also did a few interviews in Trondheim. These have not, however, been included in our reported results, as our main aim then was to refine the questionnaire.
4. We called our Norwegian project the "Multi-Channel Research Project". The part we are reporting from here is the pilot study. The Norwegian project also includes two qualitative studies: one focusing on adult's relationship in the multi-channel situation, and the other on how families – including the children – relate to TV with multiple channels. Marianne Christoffersen is responsible for the first project, Agnieszka B. Jarvoll for the second.
5. In our Norwegian version of the questionnaire, we also included two open-ended questions that were not in the original.
6. Some of the participants in our "Social Uses of Media Project" were able to meet in person after the pilot, though, including a participant from our Norwegian project. Some of the issues that we address here were also presented at the joint project meeting.
7. In Norway, even though satellite channels were available since the early 1980s, it was not until

recently that more than half of the population had access to cable or parabola antennas. In 1996, 90% of the population can watch TV2, in addition to NRK (see Vaage, 1996a).

8. Norwegians spend over 5 1/2 hours on mass media an average day, so we found it quite interesting to examine how media use is integrated into people's family lives (Vaage, 1996b). Most of these 5 1/2 hours are spent on TV, radio and newspapers.

9. 25 of the interviewed respondents were women, three were men, and in two cases the men and women were interviewed together.

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