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The 'Media Use as Social Action' Approach: Theory, Methodology, and Research Evidence So Far

Abstract

An action theoretical perspective for communication research is sketched and a general reference model of the so-called 'Media Use as Social Action' Approach is outlined; how an audience deals with the media of communication (including mass media) is considered a form of social action that is not only conceptualized as external action, but also as external action being accompanied by internal action during the process of self-interaction. This change in perspective obviously implies a shift of accent in communication research. Some of the implications for research designing and choice of adequate research methods are discussed and research evidence gained so far is critically reviewed.

Some twelve years ago – the 'Uses and Gratifications Approach' had already lost its attraction for many colleagues and its perspective was suffering from a considerable loss of attention in professional journals and academic communication research – a group of Dutch and German scholars at the Department of Communication, University of Nijmegen, started with the cooperative undertaking of initiating and conducting a series of empirical studies in communication research using a *social action perspective* as the main point of departure (Renckstorf, 1989; Renckstorf & Nelissen, 1989; Bosman et al., 1989; Renckstorf & Wester, 1992; Renckstorf & McQuail, 1996). Quite a number of studies have been published since then, for instance under the label of *'Media Use as Social Action: A European Approach to Audience Studies'* (cf. Renckstorf, McQuail & Jankowski, 1996), and quite a number of studies are still underway or not even fully sketched out yet. Some of the studies published concentrated on *theoretical* (cf., Renckstorf & Wester, 1992; Renckstorf, 1996) and/or *methodological* issues (cf. Hendriks Vettehen, Renckstorf & Wester, 1996; Renckstorf & Wester, 1997; Hendriks Vettehen, 1998), whereas others focussed on *empirical findings* (cf. Bosman & Renckstorf, 1996; Frissen, 1996; Mutsaers, 1996; Renckstorf & Hendriks Vettehen, 1996a, 1996b; Hendriks Vettehen, Hietbrink & Renckstorf, 1996). Twelve years later, time has come to reflect again on our research efforts up to now. That is, to assess anew *theory* and *methodology* of the approach, as well as the *research evidence* gained so far.

Theory: Conceptualizing 'media use' as 'social action'

At the core of an *action theoretical perspective* on human life is a *concept of man* as an action oriented being. Here, people engage in activity on the basis of their own objectives, intentions and interests; they are linked with each other through a diversity of interactions, and are capable of reflecting on their own actions and interactions with others. During the course of everyday life people are confronted with a large number of material and immaterial events, other persons, objects, considerations and questions. They are able to act upon all of these 'objects' in the environment, of which the mass media and their messages are also a part. Such action, however, must be given form by the person himself.

In contrast to the animal world, where behavior to a relatively large degree is determined by external factors or instinctively regulated (e.g., Claessens, 1968), man does not live in a type specific environment in which the instinctive capabilities of the organism readily provide acceptable reactions (Berger & Luckmann, 1967: 47). Human beings must therefore create their 'life-world' (Schütz, 1932), which is to be shared with others. In everyday life the individual is regularly confronted with repetitive situations in which solutions are developed and methods of response are tried out, to which others in turn react. In this manner the person develops 'recipe knowledge' (Berger & Luckmann, 1967: 42) with respect to potential situations and *routines* which can be employed therein. Society can be considered as the sedimented form of such shared meanings and actions.

As social beings, that is to say as more or less successfully socialized beings, people generally know how to behave, how to act relative to a particular role or position in relation to particular happenings, persons, objects or questions (see Helle, 1968; Zijderveld, 1974). According to the *normative view of social action* (cf. Wilson, 1970; Krappmann, 1969, 1972) such prescriptions for action and rules of behavior are central: the pregiven rules guide action. However, the concrete situation in which action takes place is seldom completely identical to the situation in which 'correct' action was previously exercised. Moreover, the role the person has to play consists in fact of an entire set of sometimes conflicting roles. In addition – and this point can be equally problematic – it is also the case that the 'object' for which the personal actions must be designed is generally understood, but that one can never be completely sure of this because the context is continually changing. So the individual's actual action proceeds much less problem-free than one would expect on the basis of *normative* or *dispositional* assumptions of a theory of social action (see Wilson, 1970).

According to the *interpretive view of social action*, such as symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1934; Blumer, 1969; cf. Manis & Meltzer, 1972), or the action theory of Schütz (1932, 1972; Schütz & Luckmann, 1979, 1984; Berger & Luckmann, 1967), which constitutes the foundation of the more recent variants of the sociology of knowledge (Zijderveld, 1974), the meaning-making activity of the acting person stands central. The *exceptional nature of human*

action is marked by the fact that the acting individual must interpret all *components of such action* – the *situation*, the *objects*, the *action of the other*, and the *action of the individual* – in order to provide them with meaning *and in so doing to give form to the action*. This does not necessarily mean that each and every interaction situation will be experienced as being problematic. Schütz remarks that the majority of everyday experiences- that are in accordance with former experiences – are *routinely stored* in the everyday 'stock of knowledge' and are thus given an appropriate meaning without difficulty. A subjective *problem* with which an individual must consciously be concerned only arises:

> "... if an actual experience does not readily 'fit' into a type at hand in the stock of knowledge ..." (Schütz & Luckmann, 1974: 202)

The normal procedure regarding the performing of an action in everyday reality is that the everyday situation as a problem is characterized *as non-problematic*. Such problems are naturally, and in a certain sense *pre-reflexively* (Zijderveld, 1974), provided with meaning whereby action is made possible (see figure 1).
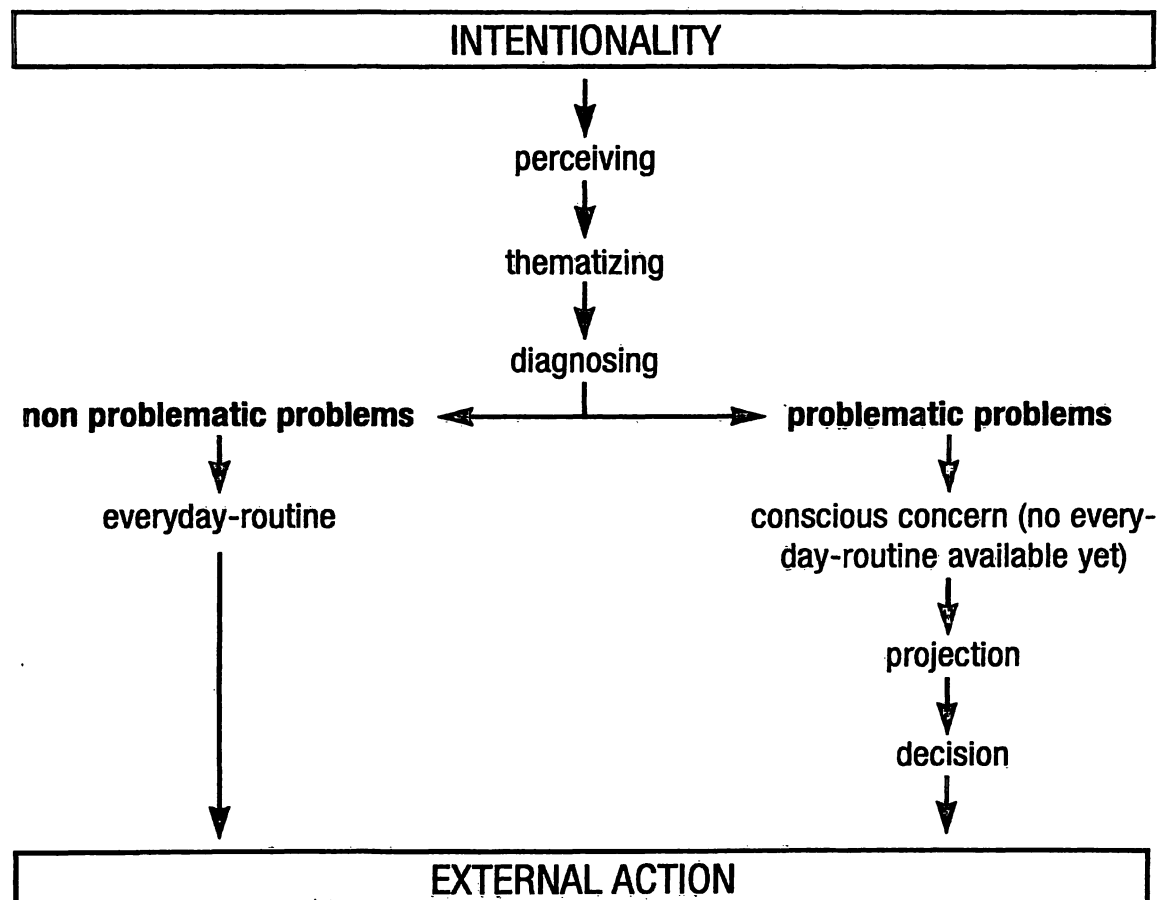

Figure 1: Steps in the process of defining the situation (cf. Renckstorf, 1996; Renckstorf & Wester, 1999: 42).

According to an interpretive, action theoretical perspective, *human action* in general, and *human social action* especially, is not to be considered a 'reaction' to an 'objective' action or even more generally an 'object', but as carefully planned activity ('re-action') in the light of the actor's own hierarchy of relevances. Or, as Blumer expressed it:

> "The human being is seen as 'social' in a ... profound sense – in the sense of an organism that engages in *social interaction with itself* by making indications to itself and responding to such indications ... Instead of being merely an organism that responds to the play of factors on or through it, the human being is seen as an organism that has to deal with what it notes. It meets what it so notes by engaging in a process of self-indication in which it makes an object of what it notes, gives it meaning, and uses the meaning as basis for directing its action. Its behavior with regard to what it notes ... is an *action* that arises out of the interpretation made through the process of self-indication". (Blumer, 1969: 14, italics added, KR/FW)

Naturally, in defining the situation and in interpreting action and objects (Thomas, 1932) a certain degree of help is provided by the social stock of knowledge (Schütz & Luckmann, 1979, 1984) that is created in each culture and is transferred through learning processes. But given that these patterns are applicable only within a particular cultural range and are relatively situation specific, they are, taken on their own, necessarily too general to really guide actions in the sense of making action problem free for the actor.

Frequently, definitions of situations are to be created through negotiations with others, and thus frameworks for meaning and interpretation are formulated anew. The meaning attached cannot thereby be considered permanent, but is rather, in principle, subject to continuous re-interpretation and re-definition (see Wilson, 1970; Blumer, 1969).

The above represents the general principles of the interpretive perspective of social action and social reality. Of course, these principles can also be applied to themes in communication research. The result of such application is evident: *mass media and their messages are merely 'objects' in the actor's social environment, which provide the person with situations to be defined.* The actors and activities in the situation are also 'objects' for the media using person, which have to be perceived, thematized and diagnosed. From this perspective the *messages* of the mass media are *not* to be considered *stimuli* on their own, but rather events which, from the background of a (subjective) system of relevances (Schütz & Luckmann, 1979 : 229–270; cf. Haferkamp, 1972), are *perceived, thematized and diagnosed* and thereby considered *'objects' which require interpretation.* With regard to the mass media and their messages this means that the media form but a part of the meaning producing symbolic environment of human actors (cf. Hunziker, 1988).

In this perspective, viewers, listeners and readers are shortchanged if they are only conceptualized as 'recipients' of mass media messages. In the framework of this perspective, media users are acting persons who interpret media messages on the basis of their own objectives, values and plans, and then – more or less carefully – construct their (external) actions. It is important to realize that the process of interpretation cannot be entirely understood or explained on the basis of mere individual characteristics; of course, the person comes to an interpretation by himself, but this is not primarily an *individual* act (Lüscher, 1975). Instead, meanings are social products, they emerge from procedures for defining within *social* interactions, and they constitute part of the identity of the person as participant in the society (Blumer, 1969). Interpretation occurs on the basis of the image the person has of himself; it is a form of self-interaction in which experiences are confronted with the (subjective) knowledge system as well as with the structure of relevances (Kleefmann, 1985). Interpretation, in short, manifests itself within the framework of the person's actual and potential patterns of social action and interaction (cf. Schütz & Luckmann, 1979, 1984).

On the basis of these considerations we are able to design a reference model for mass communication research that structures processes of mass communication according to an action theoretical perspective (see Figure 2). As McQuail and Windahl (1993) noted, the action theoretical reference model shows some evident similarity with Rosengren's model (Rosengren, 1974), that is, mass communication is assumed here too, to be an interactive and recurrent process. Nevertheless, as they admit, the starting point of the reference model is different and alternative options are presented:

"At the outset (1) we see the individual adopting or having a definition of the situation, in which experience from everyday life and interaction are perceived, thematized and interpreted. The .. factors of individual make-up, social position and experience (2 and 3) enter into the defining and interpreting processes. The 'route' followed is then either conceived as 'problematic' (4) or 'unproblematic' (5). If the former, action on the problem is contemplated, motives (6) are formulated and decisions about action taken (7). These can include media selection and use as one type of external action (8). The alternative, unproblematic, route can also lead, by way of everyday routines (9), to similar actions, also including media use. ... Whether motivated or not, media use is subject to evaluation (10) by the individual and is followed by a new sequence of definition and interpretation". (McQuail & Windahl, 1993: 144)

(2)
surrounding **society** (including mass media and social, political, cultural, economical institutions, etc.)

(1) defining the situation	(4) problem. problem	(6) motive	(7) projec- tion, decision	(8) external action	(10) e v a l u a t i o n
perceiving thematizing diagnosing	non probl. problem (5)	everyday-routine (9)	(9)	e.g. media exposure	

(3)
individual and **social characteristics** (including basic human needs, psychological set-up, social status, individual life history, etc.)
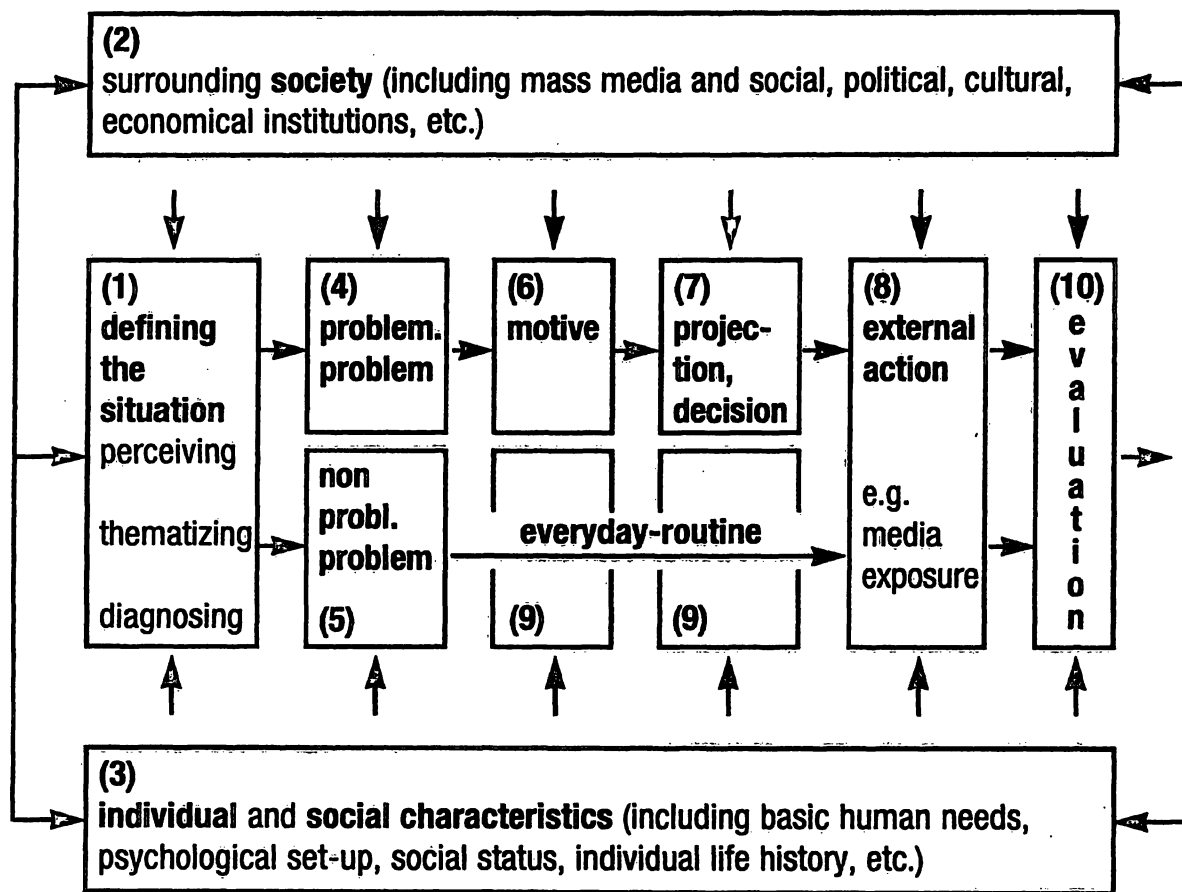
Figure 2: General action theoretical reference model for empirical (mass) communication research (cf. Renckstorf, 1996:28; Renckstorf & Wester, 1999: 44).

According to the reference model (see Figure 2) 'media use' is not to be found on a single, fixed place. Obviously, that fact itself does not mean improvement, but with the aid of the model it is possible to identify, to separate, but also, to integrate various relevant aspects of media use within one model. For example, instrumental as well as ritualized forms of media use (cf. Rubin, 1984), which often have been described as antagonistic concepts of communication research, here are integrated within the same frame of reference. And, with regard to the process of defining the situation – in the 'internal action' phases of *perceiving, thematizing* and *diagnosing* – it is reasonable to conceptualize 'media use' as *'referring to information'* formerly distributed via mass media, or, as making use of clusters of information related to complex images of reality which compare with what Lippmann (1922) once called the 'pictures in our heads'. Furthermore, in the internal phase of the (ideal type of) action process – the phase which relates to the 'internal' solution of a problem – 'media use' could be, once again, conceptualized as the preferred internal

'reference to information distributed via the media'. In the phase of 'external action'; i.e., what is often called 'overt behavior' (cf. Mead, 1934; Hulett, 1966) – the phase which relates to the 'external' solution of problems –, besides 'media exposure' in general and the 'exposure to specified types of mediated information' in particular, 'media use' can also be conceived of as the 'adoption of models' for action, as these have been found in mass mediated programs.

In Figure 2 the context of media use has been elaborated with regard to general factors contributing to the explanation of media use, especially the societal, biographical and situational factors that produce action patterns of which media use is a part. For more specific research purposes, however, this general action theoretical reference model can easily be adapted and specified to investigate special research problems. In the past years, several more specific frames of reference have been developed and employed in empirical communication research: for instance, in order to specify processes of using information offered by public information campaigns (Bosman et al., 1989: 126), in order to structure heavy viewer's use of television (Frissen, 1992; 1996: 61), or, in order to specify relevant elements of processes of using TV news (Renckstorf & Wester, 1999: 47; Schaap et al., 2001: 51; Konig, Renckstorf & Wester, 1998).

Methodology: Combining qualitative and quantitative research

According to the 'Media Use as Social Action' framework, audiences' coping with mass media and people's use of mediated messages is to be conceived of as a form of social action which is not only concerned with external action (overt behavior) but also with internal action (covert behavior), or self-interaction, during interpretation processes. Above all, this means that – in comparison to conventional communication research – there is a need for a shift in perspective. The study of 'media impact' for instance, usually regarded as the study of the 'effects of mediated messages on the behavior of their audiences', here, instead, is to be conceptualized as the study of the 'consequences audiences are taking after having perceived, thematized and diagnosed mediated material'. The implications of such a shift in perspective for research designing as well as the choice of adequate research methods have been considered in more general terms elsewhere (Renckstorf & Wester, 1992; Hendriks Vettehen, Renckstorf & Wester, 1996). Here, just some of the direct implications for communication research will be sketched: firstly, implications with regard to the research approach and, secondly, implications for the research strategy.

Research approach

While focussing on the consequences of communication processes, our framework implies a choice for a methodology which does justice to the perspective of the actor – as we are to understand his or her behavior. Since people act on

the basis of the meaning they attach to objects, we are to understand the meaning people ascribe to the objects of their everyday life. This means, a *verstehende* or *interpretive methodology* is to be employed which pays explicit attention to the reconstruction of the world of those involved. As for mass communication processes, this means – in principle – both communicators and recipients. Interpretive research shares a number of principles, four of which are briefly described here:

(1) The basis of *verstehen* is the *meaning* people ascribe to their environment. People act on the basis of the meanings they attach to objects, which together constitute their 'world' (cf. 'life-world'; Schütz, 1967). The object of research, then, is a pre-interpreted reality.

(2) In order to study people's behavior as meaningful conduct, interpretive research has to view the objects as they are perceived by actors in their everyday life situations. The researcher has, in fact, the task of *reconstructing* that reality (Schwartz & Jacobs, 1979). In Mead's terminology (Mead, 1934/1970), this has to be done by *'role taking'*; i.e., the researcher has to place himself in the position of an individual or group in order to determine the *meaning* of a situation – according to the actor's definition of that situation.

(3) There are two main implications regarding the research design: firstly, as Blumer put it, there should be a *direct examination of the empirical world* (Blumer, 1969: 33), and, secondly, the research procedure has to be as *open* as possible; i.e., directed towards direct contact with the reality studied. This leads to a different research procedure. The procedure is *not* to first formulate concepts, operationalize and then measure them, but to respect the nature of the empirical world of everyday experience by becoming acquainted with the sphere of social life under study. Theories and concepts are to be elaborated through *exploration* and *inspection* of that world. Filstead (1970: 2) in this regard considered qualitative methodology as *"firsthand involvement in the social world"*. In order to achieve a description of events as detailed as possible, different data gathering techniques, such as observation, interview and content analysis have to be employed that complement each other ('triangulation').

(4) A thus accomplished description in terms of the actor's perspective towards social reality ('inner perspective'), however, is not sufficient. This meaningful reality has to be objectified in concepts. This principle constitutes the core of qualitative analysis. Schütz (1972) and Bruyn (1966) mention in this regard the 'ideal types', whereas Blumer (1969) suggests the use of 'sensitizing concepts'.

That these well sounding principles are far from being trivial for the *methodology*, i.e., the consistent combination of *theory* and concrete *research methods*, of an action theoretically based communication research can be illustrated for the case of content analysis. *Content analysis* is an interpretive method by definition, but this does not mean that any application of content analysis techniques is relevant. As to the perspective used here, mediated materials are not significant in their own right, but should be studied from the everyday life perspective of their producers as well as their users. The description of mediated material *per se*, whether possible at all, is inadequate and content analysis as a research method for an 'objective' description of mediated material rather irrelevant. Instead, mediated materials have to be studied (a) in the context of the work *media users* have to do in order to make sense of it, and (b) as the products of actions of media authors. As to the former, content analysis may be applied to give information referring to the context of *media reception*. With regard to the latter, one general application of content analysis as a research method in an interpretive perspective is the description of *mediated materials* as the *objectified forms of the activities of media communicators*. Although such a description may give insights into characteristics and variations in professional communicator behavior, these observations should be related to the perspectives relevant in that context. Thus, applied in an interpretive context, content analysis may be used in combination with, for instance, document study, interviews and/or participation in *media production* situations.

Research strategy

The action theoretical model focuses on the complexity of media use, which is conceived of as social action taking place within the individual and social boundaries of everyday life situations. An adequate *research strategy*, then, should aim not only at an understanding of *individual media use* (including individual interpretation and meaning-making), but also at an understanding of its *social embeddedness*. Essentially, a convincing research strategy should be directed towards the study of regularities in media use; e.g., the study of individual and social *patterns of media use*. That is, among other things, an integrated planning of various types of *qualitative* as well as *quantitative* research is needed – exploratory, theory-developing, hypothesis-testing and evaluation research – in order to investigate such patterns.

The shift in accent from *external* observable action to *internal* action processes – *perceiving, thematizing, diagnosing* and, further, *projection* and *decision* of action – and the related need for more insight into these processes places certain demands on the research strategy, too. It is evident that *internal action processes* ('covert behavior') cannot be 'measured' in the same way as external action ('overt behavior'). The former involves a more qualitative research strategy to determine whether and how internal

action processes can be made visible. *Qualitative research* can provide the analytical framework as well as the research instruments to do that (see Wester, 1995; Peters & Wester, 1989; Hendriks Vettehen, Renckstorf & Wester, 1996). In this regard, even biographical research, such as life history-research, of (types of) recipients may be undertaken. The insights gained may later be used to develop larger scale descriptive or hypothesis-testing quantitative research. *Quantitative research* can help much in discovering regularities in the processes of defining situations and, thus, the interpretation of mediated material that bring about certain *routines* and/or *patterns* in media use. Thus, *regularities* in a whole series of actions are measured – and not just during one or two isolated action sequences. The same holds true for the characteristics of the actor's social situation and his stock of knowledge; these structural aspects are the first to be measured. Next, regularities in actions are related to regularities in social situation and stock of knowledge characteristics. And, finally, regularities in the intermediating processes are to be inferred from these relations. In such a manner, quantitative research and quantitative methods may also help to provide some essential insights into the processes leading to and following media use (cf. Hendriks Vettehen, Renckstorf & Wester, 1996).

In line with the research approach described above, the *case study* should be used more often as a research design (cf. Charlton & Neumann, 1985; Lull, 1980, 1988). This involves a clear reorientation towards the investigation of a relatively small number of cases chosen on an analytical basis rather than large representative surveys (see Barton, 1968; Strauss, 1987; Wester, 1995). Clearly, this is not to say that (large scale) *survey research* in particular, or quantitative research methods in general, could not be useful in approaching the problems within the field of mass communication; on the contrary, provided that the problem statement is clear and the researcher has got considerably elaborate concepts of the field in order to define hypotheses and operationalizations, quantitative research will prove to be extremely useful. Sometimes survey research is really essential, but in relation to the framework presented here, survey research cannot be the *only* or, without further specification, be the *preferred* research approach for empirical (mass) communication research.

The above-mentioned implications lead, again, to the need for an integrated planning of various types of research – exploratory, theory-developing, hypothesis-testing and evaluation research – around questions formulated on the basis of the theoretical framework. In such a *program* for (mass) communication research, *applied* and *fundamental* research projects should be closely related. The status quo in communication research nowadays is still such that large scale continuous and quantifying research projects are solely characterized as relevant in a policy context. As is often not recognized, however, many small scale qualitative research projects also contribute substan-

tially, and do often fit better in a policy context (cf. Patton, 1980). That is why an integration of both *qualitative* and *quantifying* research is proposed here (cf. Hendriks Vettehen, Renckstorf & Wester, 1996: 42).

> *Qualitative methods* are especially suitable as a method of exploration because of their flexibility (Wester, 1995). With the use of methods such as participant observation, in-depth interviews and group discussions it is possible to acquire very detailed empirical material. This enables us to reconstruct intermediary definition and interpretation processes more accurately and to develop theories on a more abstract level about the way these processes work.

> *Quantitative methods*, on the other hand, have attractive aspects such as the relatively easy processing of data and the possibility of generalizing research results statistically for larger populations than those investigated.

Through planning and coordination, it should be made possible that these types of research yield cross-pollination. One may also consider the formula whereby research of the one type is in principle related to research questions of the other type. The action theoretical reference model may therefore function as *source of guidance* both for large scale quantitative and for small scale qualitative research – as well as for their integration.

Research evidence so far

The function of research approaches in general, and reference models, such as the general action theoretical reference model in particular, is at least three-fold and may be described as follows:

(1) *ordering and structuring* of relevant literature and existing research findings,

(2) *steering and stimulating* present and future research, and,

(3) *integration of findings* of present and future research, and, thus, allowing the accumulation of insights and building up a professional 'body of knowledge'.

Ordering and structuring of research

With regard to the first function, *ordering and structuring of existing research findings*, several attempts were made to review specific fields of communication research.

First of all, we started with an overview of existing literature in the field of *people's use of public information campaigns* resulting in several advices for the reformulation of research questions and the reorganization of common research projects in this area (Bosman et al., 1989; Renckstorf & Van Woerkum, 1990; Nelissen, 1991). A specific reference model was developed, which has been serving since then as solid base for numerous empirical studies carried

out by staff (cf. Van der Rijt, 1996, 1998, 2000; Van der Rijt & Need, 1996) as well as students at the Department of Communication, University of Nijmegen (cf. Nelissen, 2002). In all these studies, audiences are not conceptualized as passive receivers of information delivered by public organizations, but as agents actively approaching mediated materials against the background of their own perspectives.

Another attempt was made with regard to the problem of *heavy viewing*. Despite the considerable social and scientific interest in the phenomenon of 'heavy viewers', research had been driven by a rather one-sided and stereotypical concept of this category of people, characterized by an extensive exposure to televised programs (Frissen, 1992, 1996). A theoretical perspective on heavy viewing was in fact absent and an adequate interpretation of research findings was, thus, impeded. Heavy viewing was often understood as being a part of a complex *syndrome*, which *includes lower education, lower mobility, lower aspirations, higher anxieties* and further *class and gender related characteristics* (cf. Gerbner & Gross, 1976). Instead, as Frissen's empirical study showed, heavy viewing can – and should – be conceptualized as a multi-faceted phenomenon; i.e., "...a pattern of social action which can take different forms and follow different definitions of the situation." What Frissen found in her Ph.D. thesis, was *not* "one, all embracing explanation of heavy viewing, but ...empirical clues for *different, situation-specific explanations of the phenomenon of heavy viewing* in different stages of the life cycle" (Frissen, 1996: 69).

The – up to now – perhaps most ambitious attempt of *ordering and structuring* relevant literature and existing research findings was made with regard to the field of TV news research. Three decades of academic TV *news research;* i.e., some 250 empirical studies published in the period 1970–1998, were reviewed and the findings published as an *'action theoretical inventory of issues and problems'* (Schaap, Renckstorf & Wester, 2001). As one of the problems in reviewing TV news research was the enormous amount and the diversity of the studies, a specific *action theoretical frame of reference for the study of TV news use* (see Figure 3) was developed and applied in order to provide a systematic, consistent and theoretically coherent overview of recent research on TV news use for the sake of pointing out 'gaps' of past research and defining some 'new' issues for a future research agenda.

By reviewing the relevant research literature, the presumed lack of theoretical coherence soon became evident, and the conclusion was drawn that research efforts up to then did not yet lead to definite insights into either the *impact* of TV news or the *social functions* of televised news. According to the specified action theoretical reference model applied[1], ten *major research domains* were discerned. As could be shown, past research efforts have not been evenly distributed among these domains. At least four somewhat 'underdeveloped' domains in TV news research were identified: 'interaction situation', 'action strategies', 'social networks', and 'objectivation' (Schaap et al., 2001: 71).

For instance, not much research has been done on the *interaction situation* in which the use of TV news is embedded. Evidence so far, we concluded, "... allows for some sketchy conclusions about everyday viewing practices and activities, but much is still uncharted." (ibidem: 72) As media use is conceived of as a social activity, the *influence of 'others'* in the viewing surroundings should be studied more systematically, for instance, with regard to *'para-social interaction'*, or, with regard to the *changing role the media* may play for their users in times of changing media landscapes. The role of *everyday time schedules*, as well as the role *'others'* play with regard to the development of *television viewing routines* and/or *patterns of TV news use*, have not been studied sufficiently.

Further domains, such as *action strategies, social networks*, and *objectivation*, turned out to be underinvestigated fields of TV news research too; many of the relevant research questions to be posed here are still left unanswered, whereas others have not yet been answered in a really convincing way. Although it seems quite evident – as to the domain of *action strategies* – that most of TV news use is a matter of *routine*, very little is known about situations in which people are confronted with information that is highly *problematic* to them, in other words: *problematic* and *non-problematic* coping with TV news has hardly been discerned and described – nor explained. Little is known about the effects of *social networks* on situation definitions of TV news users and little is known about how the viewer is *socialized* in news viewing. Still less is known about long-term effects of TV news use on behavioral patterns, or *objectivation*. In fact, not a single study was found, which specifically investigates *action patterns* related to TV news viewing. Perhaps one of the most interesting, but hardly addressed questions concerning *objectivation* is how *patterns of TV news use* are influenced and shaped – i.e. socially determined – by *(sub)cultural forms of news viewing*.
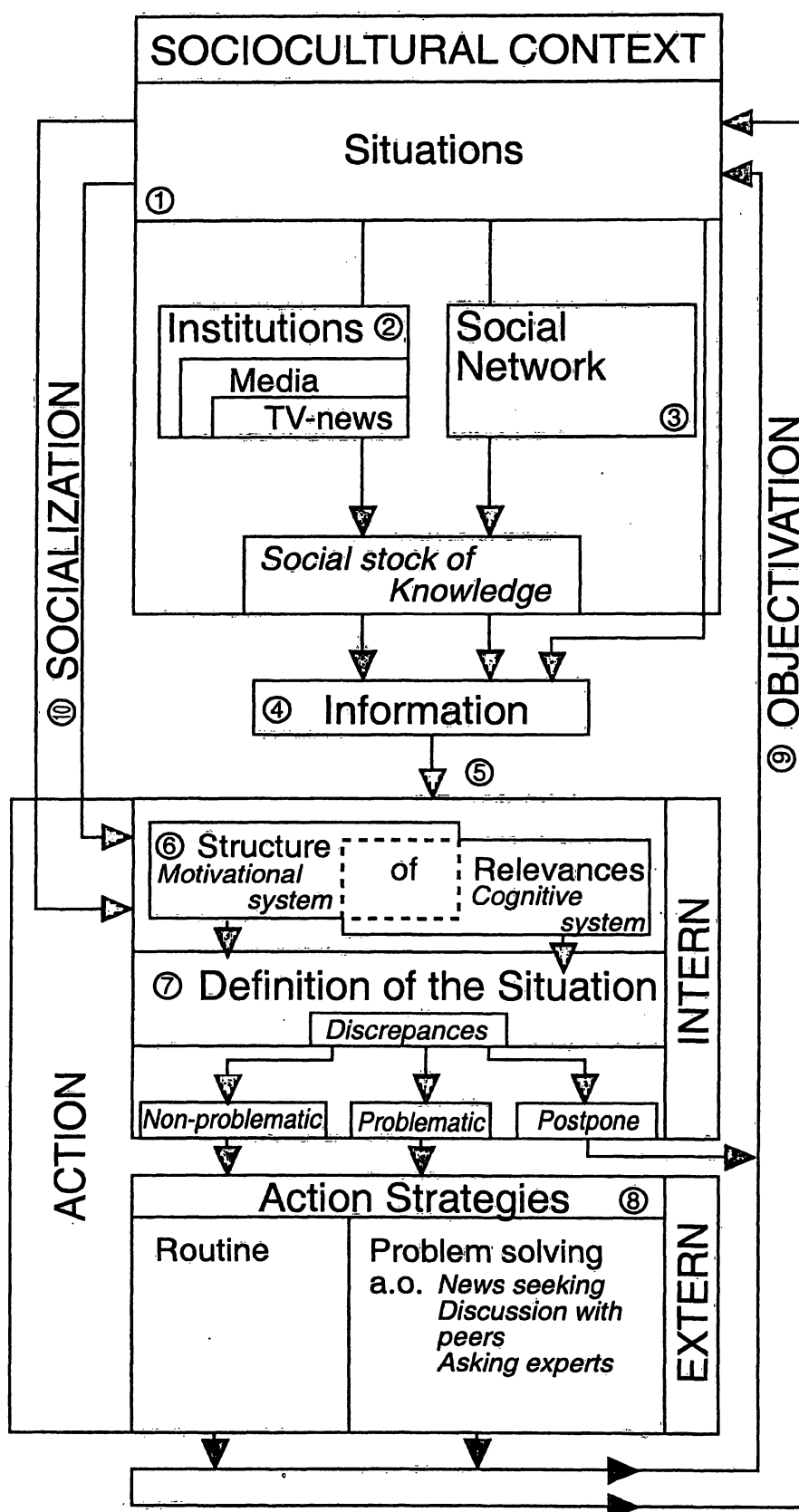
Figure 3: Specified action theoretical model for the study of television news use (cf. Renckstorf & Wester, 1999: 47).

On the other hand, four of the ten domains discerned – such as *relevance structure, definition of the situation, institutions* and *information* – had in fact enjoyed a great deal of past research efforts. However, as could be shown, there is much left that still has to be investigated and/or re-investigated, as the research perspectives chosen so far proved to be rather inadequate to tackle the problem at hand in a convincing manner. For instance, the *interpretation of televised news,* often conceptualized as *recall* and/or *comprehension* of TV news, has essentially been studied in cognitive processing terminology only. Research results, often showing *poor recall ratings* as well as *low comprehension levels* – in comparison to what had been delivered on screen – , have usually been interpreted from the standpoint of an 'objective' observer, whereas the results may also point to an integrated processing of TV news. Evidently, viewers tend to restructure the news and make inferences about news – according to their own structure of relevances – when processing them. This calls for a *'user perspective'* on the interpretation of TV news. And that is why Schaap et al. argued, it might be just the practice of present mainstream news research – based on an *'objective observer perspective'* – that "... accounts for a great deal of 'misunderstandings' found in present recall or comprehension research." (ibidem)[2]

With regard to the domain of *institutions* – to give a last example, here – we suggested to investigate the role *information sources* may play in the process of news making. From an action theoretical perspective the process of news making, carried out by professional journalists, is assumed to be a process of continuously defining and re-defining what *did happen* and what *did not,* thus, a process of *constructing a social reality* by permanently taking *decisions* about which events, which developments in the world/the country/ the region, respectively did take place and which ones did not. As journalists are almost always dependent on information they get from others, journalists' use of information sources should play a crucial role in the process of news production (cf. Pleijter & Renckstorf, 1998: 84).

For a more comprehensive overview over alternative research issues for the study of television news use suggested in our inventory, see Table 1.

Table 1: Suggestions for television news research agenda (Schaap et al., 2001: 74)

Research Issues	
Present	*Additional*
(2) Institutions	
- norms & values of news making	- concept of news
- news content characteristics	- non-media institutions
	- news information sources
(3) Social Networks	- quality of media performance
- networks as sources	
- networks as socialization agents	- networks as knowledge provider
	- how the viewer is socialized
(5) Interaction Situation	- time schedules
- exposure & everyday life	- other activities (attentiveness)
- watching news as social activity	- 'others' presence (use patterns)
- parasocial interaction	
(7) Definition of the Situation	
process	
- interpreting news	- interpretation differences (range)
product	- emotional response (news definition)
- comprehension	- incidental learning
- recall	- power of the text
- evaluation	- actual outcomes
(8) Action Strategies	
- routine	- non-problematic coping
- active problem solving	- problematic coping
(9) Objectivation	
- viewing patterns	- professional groups
- professional views	

Steering and stimulating research

An important function of research approaches is, of course, the function of *steering and stimulating* research. By *initiating and directing empirical communication research* in accordance with the approach at hand, it is supposed to gain insights into the use people make of mediated communication – as well as the consequences this has.

Much of our research activities up to now have been concentrating, though not exclusively, on the fields mentioned above.[3] For present purposes here, we will limit our overview[4] to just some twenty empirical studies[5] covering the following four areas: research (1) on the *use audiences make of television*, (2)

on the *use people make of information delivered by public information campaigns*, (3) on the *use communicators make of the media (making news)*, and (4) on the *use audiences make of television news*.

(1) On the use audiences make of television

According to the action theoretical model, *audiences* are considered to be a central element in mass communication. They are actively engaged in processes of mediated communication on the basis of their own specific objectives, intentions and interests. Furthermore, the model postulates that all participants in the communication process – communicators as well as audiences – are capable of reflecting on their own behavior and continuously do so in interaction with others within their social networks. This active involvement forms the basis for the actor's media use; i.e., his/her interpretation of reality and, thus, his/her interpretation of media content. Research undertaken up to now addresses the use of television and televised messages by *different audiences* and focuses on the ways people within *specific situations* attend to, experience, and render meaning to television and television content.

Issues investigated up to now include *heavy viewing, non-viewing,* and *attending to foreign TV channels, television-viewing in different social contexts, etc.*

Frissen (1996): Heavy viewing as social action

In spite of the considerable social and scientific interest in the phenomenon of 'heavy viewing', research has been driven by a rather one-sided and stereotypical image of the category of 'heavy viewers'. *'Heavy viewing' was supposed to be a part of a complex syndrome, which includes lower education, lower mobility, lower aspirations, higher anxieties and other class and gender related characteristics.* Frissen develops an alternative theoretical perspective by which 'heavy viewing' is considered a form of social action. Using data from a 1989 national survey in The Netherlands (n=956), no evidence is found for an all-embracing explanation of 'heavy viewing'. Instead, some empirical support is gained in favor of different, *situation-specific explanations of the phenomenon of 'heavy viewing'* in different stages of the life cycle.

Renckstorf & Hendriks Vettehen (1996a): Non-viewers in The Netherlands

The authors examine the relative small proportion of the Dutch population which *never* watches television. The lack of interest in *structural non-viewers* in recent communication research was rather remarkable, inasmuch they constitute a substantial part of our contemporary, western societies; the amount of structural non-viewers is estimated to be between 3 and 4 per cent of the adult population. Descriptive analyses of data from a 1989 national survey in The Netherlands (n=956) suggest that in The

Netherlands there are *two distinct types of non-viewers.* First, there are the very religious *Calvinist non-viewers,* who often belong to the lower socio-economic strata and second, the *non-Calvinist non-viewers* often stemming from higher socio-economic strata. These two types of non-viewers hold totally different values and attitudes – and differ sharply in their social activities as well as the use of other media. The findings question – among others – the commonly held position that *non-viewing* indicates *social disintegration.*

Renckstorf & Hendriks Vettehen (1996b): Watching foreign TV channels

As a result of the deregulation of national and international communication markets, the availability of foreign TV channels has been tremendously increasing in The Netherlands during the past years – as it has in most of the European countries. It was feared/hoped that watching foreign TV channels might undercut *'cultural identity'*, or put differently, might help to educate people and prepare them for 'world citizenship'. The analysis of data from a national survey in The Netherlands (n=956) suggests that a preference for foreign TV channels does not imply a greater interest in or appreciation of events happening outside the viewer's immediate social and cultural environment. Instead, watching foreign TV channels seems to be a case of availability, general interest and program preference.

Brehm (1994): Patterns of watching television

An illustration of a qualitative survey conducted from the perspective of the social action model for media use is Brehm's (1994) investigation of patterns of television viewing in the context of everyday activities through interviews with persons living together (n=15). She elaborates a *typology of viewing patterns* and finds that, although every *household* had a dominant pattern for *watching television together,* there were different viewing patterns for the partners when *watching television alone.*

Mutsaers (1996): Television viewing as social activity

Watching television usually takes place within the social context of family life. As a consequence, viewers must take into account interests and preferences for particular programs of other household members. Program choice and selection is, therefore, seldom an individual affair, but the result of group interaction. This is one of the factors that may lead to different *patterns in viewing behavior* and differences in the social uses of television between people living together and those living alone. Using data from a 1989 national survey in The Netherlands (n=956), results support the idea that *program choice* is normally not an individual, but a collective activity. Since co-viewers influence program choice, viewers are often forced to let program preferences of their house-mates prevail over their own. Consequently, the larger the size of a household is, the more often

viewers have to comply with choices of their co-viewers. Furthermore, there is evidence for a correlation between the variety of TV program types watched and the number of people in a household. The more people with which viewers have to negotiate about program choice, the more 'impoverished' the program choice of the family as a whole becomes.

Huysmans, Lammers, Renckstorf & Wester (2000): Television viewing and the temporal organization of daily life in households

A considerable share of free time is spent in the social context of a household (cf. Huysmans, 2001). The social character of living together affects the times of a day at which activities take place. Time use research in households provides an opportunity to study the extent of household members' conducting the same activities at particular times of the day. Using data of a summer 1997 time use study, including several questionnaires and diaries, administered by a sample of households (n=136) in Nijmegen, The Netherlands, a multilevel analysis of data on television use show to what extent television viewing is influenced by the temporal organization of the household.

(2) On the use people make of information delivered by public information campaigns

How to explain presence or absence of an audience's *information* need for information delivered by public information campaigns and/or public information services? Why do some people actively seek information and how do they manage to get it, whereas others are absolutely not interested? Questions like these have been important concerns for communication research on the 'effects' of public information campaigns, as understanding these matters may offer insights relevant for designing proper strategies to reach and inform people more adequately by public information campaigns.

Research up to now has been concentrating, for instance, on the concept *information needs* as well as on types of information seeking.

Bosman & Renckstorf (1996): On the concept of 'information needs': Problems, interest and media consumption

The *need for information* as a predictor for information consumption has been criticized in recent years, particularly because it was often used in communication research as an autonomous explanatory factor. According to an action theoretical view on the use of public information campaigns (cf. Bosman et al., 1989), *subjectively experienced (perceived) problems* are the central factor in the creation of a demand for information, and therefore in the pursuit of knowledge. In this study the authors try to establish the determinants of information needs. A distinction is made between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation for information consumption. Based on a secondary analysis of data from a 1989 nationwide survey in The Netherlands (n=956), an examination is made into the relative

importance of *subjectively experienced problems* as an extrinsic motivation in explaining *information needs* as well as *information consumption*.

Van der Rijt (1996): Information needs of the elderly

This study elaborates on the proposition that two main *types of information seeking* behavior can be distinguished, namely, first, a process of information seeking of a more *routine* character and, secondly, a process of information seeking that is much more *specific* in nature. As secondary analyses of data (n=319) from research on relevance and feasibility of a special health information program for elderly people on local TV in the city of Rotterdam, The Netherlands, show, there is empirical evidence for the proposition. The first type of information seeking behavior implies a more *general orientation* to accumulate information with regard to a specific domain, while the second type is characterized by a *specific orientation* in order to seek out specific information on a special topic. Furthermore, it is suggested that each type of information seeking may have different roots or determinants: the first type may be determined by social position and professional interest, whereas the second type may be determined by 'problematic' problems which people experience.

Van der Rijt & Need (1996): Problem-guided and interest-guided information seeking

In their study the authors test the assumption that different *patterns of information seeking behavior* have different determinants. It is postulated that the search for specific, instant information in a certain domain is more *problem-guided*, while information seeking with a more routine character is more *interest-guided*. These propositions were tested in an evaluation study of a health information device ('Youth and Health') for primary schools and day care centers in Rotterdam, The Netherlands, and surrounding areas. A mail questionnaire was sent to the person at the primary school or day-care center who bears the responsibility for children's health. As analyses of the data (n=218) show, there are two different sorts of uses of the guidebook, with different explanations. A *routine search for information*, indicated by an extensive reading of the guidebook, is mainly determined by *professional interest* in health information, whereas a more *specific search for information*, as indicated by using the guidebook as a reference volume, is mainly determined by the number of actual health *problems perceived*. The results, thus, indicate clear evidence for the foregoing propositions.

Van der Rijt (1998): Determinants of the consumption of health information in the media

In previous research on the use of health information some evidence has been found for the supposition that at least two patterns of information seeking can be discerned: a *problem-guided* and an *interest-guided* pattern. For the purposes of the first pattern (i.e., problem-guided), the general

mass media are supposed to be of little value, as the information supply is volatile and thus just seldom available when needed – in order to solve an instant problem. Mass media therefore are better suited for the second type of information seeking; i.e., the *interest-guided* type, in order to scan available media on relevant health information. Using data from a 1994 national survey in The Netherlands, analyses of a representative sample (n=782) of the Dutch population, 18 to 70 years of age, strongly support the assumption that exposure to health information in the mass media is mainly interest-guided and much less problem-guided. Relevant factors that determine a person's exposure to health information in the media appear to be gender, a preventive orientation towards health and professional involvement, as well as *active avoidance* of health information.

Nelissen (2000): Informing cancer patients

In The Netherlands, cancer patients can turn to a great many agencies to obtain information about their disease. Health practitioners in hospitals may play an important role in *supplying relevant information*, because they have direct and frequent contact to these patients. Using Sense-Making methodology, the author tries to answer the following questions: Which questions do patients have? How are they answered? What is the role of the medical care network in this? Interviews with health practitioners and their patients from two hospitals (n=17 and n=24, respectively) were conducted. Qualitative analyses showed that – according to patients – *medical information* supply is generally regarded quite satisfactory. More clearly than these qualitative analyses, quantitative analyses showed that patients' questions are largely of a *non-medical* kind, whereas health practitioners tend to restrict themselves to offering merely medical information.

(3) On the use communicators make of the media (making news)

According to the action theoretical model, professional communicators, such as newspapermen, radio- or television-journalists, are seen as important participants of processes of mediated communication as well. They, like audiences, are actively engaged in mass communication processes on the basis of their specific objectives, intentions and interests.

Issues investigated up to now include the role *information* sources play for journalists in the course of their daily *routines* of defining news and constructing reality, the role *audiences* play for TV news journalists, as well as the role *prejudice* may play in the production and reception of TV news.

Pleijter & Renckstorf (1998): Deciding what's news. A case study on the use of information sources by regional newspaper journalists in The Netherlands

How do journalists define what 'news' is, how do they construct 'reality' – and, what is the role journalists' *information sources* play in the process

of professional news production? The case study was designed to explore *how, when* and *why* journalist of a middle-sized regional Dutch newspaper make use of information sources. By means of a *content analysis,* including all news reports that appeared on the regional pages in a four-week period in 1994 (n=482), and by means of *participant observation* and *open interviews* with a sample of journalists (n=12) of that newspaper, daily professional *routines* of *constructing reality* and *defining news* were investigated. Results from the content analysis show that journalists tend to make use of socially acknowledged institutions and organizations as primary sources of information. More specifically, findings from participant observation and open interviews revealed that the *organization of news gathering* as well as the *professional standards* held by the journalists are factors responsible for *the important role established institutions (such as the police and local authorities) play as sources of information.*

Hermans (2000): Professional activities of television news journalists

This Ph.D. project aims at the perception TV news journalists have of their audience – and the way it involves their professional activities. It was decided to study the professional activities of Dutch TV news journalists in a broader context, as the way the news production process is organized shapes the situational context for the professional activities of journalists. The rough research question was reformulated in two more specific research questions: (1) How is the daily production process of TV news organized in which the journalists act? (2) Are there shared meaning schemes and reality constructs underlying the occupational activities of the TV news journalists? Qualitative field research was administered; i.e., data were gathered in the natural setting of the newsroom of the Dutch public broadcasting system (NOS-journaal), responsible for about ten bulletins per day. The methods used to gather data for this case study were observations, including informal talks, and open interviews (n=31). Results show, among other, that journalists' perception of their audience is specified by the thoughts, conceptions and interpretations they have of the people for whom they make their news items. Journalists give various meanings to the concept 'audience': on the one hand they refer to the actual viewer of their program, on the other they refer to their potential target group; i.e., all people for whom the news is made. It seems quite evident that journalists use their audience as a reference group to consider how to present a news item. However, journalists think the audience cannot and should not be involved in the decisions which events have to be defined as news. Because of their professional skills, journalists find themselves capable of making the best decisions – in the public interest.

Konig (ongoing): On the influence of prejudice on the production and reception of television news

An ongoing research project on the influence of prejudice on the production and reception of television news is introduced and outlined. The

theoretical perspective of the project is derived from the sociology of knowledge of Berger & Luckmann (1967). Much emphasis is put on the definition and discussion of television news and prejudice from this perspective. The main research questions are introduced (including questions such as 'Is prejudice against Germany and Germans really meddling with the production and reception of news in the Netherlands?', and, 'How does prejudice against Germany and Germans influence the production and reception of news?), and the research design is unfolded, using Dutch television news about Germany and Germans as a case.

(4) On the use audiences make of television news

Having reviewed the relevant research literature at least four somewhat 'underdeveloped' domains in television news research were identified: *'inter-action situation'*, 'action strategies', 'social networks', and 'objectivation' (Schaap et al., 2001:71). Not much research has been done so far on the inter-action situation in which the use of television news is embedded. As media use is conceived of as a *social* activity, the *influence of 'others'* in the viewing surroundings should be studied more systematically, for instance, with regard to *'parasocial interaction'*, or, with regard to the *changing role the media* may play for their users in times of changing media landscapes. The role of *every-day time schedules*, as well as the role 'others' play with regard to the development of *television news viewing routines* and/or *patterns of TV news use*, have not been studied sufficiently.

The issues investigated up to now include the role of *prior knowledge* and *personal relevance* in recalling TV news items, the *use women make of TV news*, the exploration of *routines* and *patterns of TV news use*, as well as the *interpretation of televised news*.

Hendriks Vettehen, Hietbrink & Renckstorf (1996): Differences between men and women in recalling television news

One of the most consistent findings of television news research is that men on the average recall TV news items better than women. Attempts to explain findings as these, however, have seldom been undertaken. In this study hypotheses are tested in a laboratory setting (n=83) with regard to differences in *prior knowledge* and *personal relevance* between men and women. The findings from this study suggest that prior knowledge does have a mediating effect on recall. Men, in other words, do not necessarily recall all news items better, inasmuch as recall depends at least partially on prior knowledge of the items presented.

Hermans & Van Snippenburg (1996): Women's use of television news

Although most people watch television news regularly, little is known about the meaning they attach to the genre 'television news' as a whole or to the various issues reported. In this qualitative survey (n=14) women from dif-

ferent social backgrounds were interviewed in order to explore Dutch *women's use of the news;* i.e., news exposure as well as rendered meanings. Analyses of in-depth interviews conducted suggest that – in addition to commonly cited variables like educational level and employment – *type of employment* and the *cultural climate* within the respondent's childhood family are also related to exposure and involvement with TV news issues.

Konig, Renckstorf & Wester (1998): On the use of television news: Routines in watching the news

According to the action theoretical view on the use of TV news, an appropriate concept of television news use should not only refer to internal and external actions of self-conscious audience members, but should also take into account the social and situational *contexts* in which news watching is embedded. The so-called *'interaction situation'* consists of more than just a television set and a viewer watching the news. This study addresses some dimensions of the *interaction situation* of using TV news; that is, characteristics of the ways in which people routinely structure the social and situational contexts surrounding their daily news watching, are explored. Using data from a 1994 national survey in the Netherlands (n=969), *routines* in everyday use of television news use are explored and socio-cultural profiles of everyday news watching are described. Two *specific routines* in everyday news watching can be discerned and clearly distinguished from three *more general routines* in watching television in general

Konig, Renckstorf & Wester (forthcoming): Patterns in television news use

In this study patterns of television news use are explored. In a previous study (Konig et al., 1998) *routines* were defined as the standard ways of using TV news in everyday situations, whereas *patterns* are defined here as *combinations of such routines*. Using data from a national survey in The Netherlands (n=969), results of quantitative analyses indicate that people are much more likely to prefer watching TV news selectively and attentively than watching the news while simultaneously engaging in other activities. The chances of this preference for watching TV news selectively and attentively are even greater for women, younger people and people without well-informed citizen's values, the chance of watching TV news selectively and attentively are somewhat smaller. No evidence of interaction between these determinants was found. Contrary to our expectations, education, occupation, and having children do not seem to influence self-reported patterns of television news use.

Schaap (ongoing): The interpretation of television news

The *interpretation of televised news,* in past projects has often been conceptualized as a problem of *recall* and/or *comprehension* of television

news, and, as a matter of fact, has essentially been studied in cogn itive processing terminology only. Research results, often showing *poor recall* ratings as well as *low comprehension levels* have usually been interpreted from the standpoint of an 'objective' observer, whereas the results may also point to an integrated processing of television news. Evidently, viewers tend to *restructure the news* and *make inferences* about news – according to their own structure of relevances – when processing them. This calls for a *'user perspective'* on the interpretation of TV news, and this is why, as we already mentioned above, Schaap et al. argued, it might be just the practice of present mainstream news research that "... accounts for a great deal of 'misunderstandings' found in present recall or comprehension research" (Schaap et al., 2001: 72). In this ongoing study an interpretive view on the use of TV news is used. Watching the news is regarded as one of the many ways by which people try to make sense of the outside world. They do so, it is assumed, by relating news items (events) to the things they already know: comparing them, weighting them, and sometimes using them to form an opinion on a given subject. This process, which is called here *interpretation,* results in *thoughts.* While it may be impossible to measure the *process* of interpretation, it is presumed here, that it should be possible to administer certain techniques which can bring us close to people's *thoughts,* i.e. the *result* from that process. Thus, as is assumed here, it should be possible to get an idea of what these internal processes constitute by measuring the immediate *outcome* of interpretation processes. In the present stage of the project it is tried to achieve this by *analyzing verbal reports* (cf. *protocol analysis).*

Integration of research findings and accumulation of insights

The most important function of research approaches, evidently, is the third function. The *integration of findings* of present (and future) research, and thus allowing the *accumulation of insights* in order to build up a consistent professional 'body of knowledge' is, obvious enough, crucial for the further development of communication science as an academic discipline. However, at this moment we have to be rather short about this function here.

Although it will appear to us that the integration of findings, for instance, of the projects sketched above should be possible in the context of a *meta-analysis,* we have to admit that this has not been done yet. At this stage – of past research efforts and ongoing research projects as well – there is no clear evidence available yet whether the 'Media Use as Social Action' approach really meets the demands of the third function.

In conclusion

As stated at the outset, some twelve years after introducing the 'Media Use as Social Action' Approach the colloquium on "Action Theoretical Approaches in European Communication Research: Theory, Methods & Findings", was a

good occasion to reflect again on our research efforts up to now. That is, to assess anew *theory* and *methodology* of the 'Media Use as Social Action' approach, as well as the *research evidence* gained so far.

What did we come to learn from this assessment?

First, the underlying *theory* was presented here in a rather compact version, including a *general action theoretical reference model.* Essentially, this modeling remained unchanged up to now. Furthermore, several specified models have been formulated, relating to *specific research* issues. In these specified models ten domains could be discerned – and it seems as if the relevant research problems up to now could be structured by means of these domains.

Secondly, with regard to the *methodology* a *research approach* as well as a *research strategy* have been sketched which meet the demands of an action theoretical approach. The key issue of the research strategy, thus, is the interpretation of *individual actions* and perspectives in terms of *social patterns.* This asks for the integration of inventories (e.g., large scale survey research) and interpretive research methods (e.g., qualitative case studies) in order to discover action patterns – and define them in more generalized terms.

Thirdly, the *research evidence so far* has been reviewed here against the background of three functions research approaches should serve. As could be shown, some success in *monitoring;* i.e., in *ordering and structuring* of past research efforts was booked. With regard to the field of *people's use of public information campaigns,* the problem of *heavy viewing* and with regard to *television news research* as well. By means of specified action theoretical reference models, such as *the specified action theoretical model for the study of television news use* existing research were inventoried and new relevant research questions were generated. With regard to the *stimulating* function, it will seem to us that a rather rich tradition of empirical communication research has been emerging. As illustrated above, research projects within four areas of research have been formulated and carried out – showing some internal *consistency* and, thus, leading hopefully towards a *coherent* research program. But with regard to the most important function of research approaches; i.e., *integration of findings* and *accumulation of insights,* we had to state that at this point no work has been done yet. Whether the action theoretical approach outlined here, meets the demands of the third function could – and should – be assessed in the context of a *meta-analysis.*

Evidently, much work remains to be done. But next to a series of ongoing research projects, including projects on the *conceptualization and measurement of media literacy,* the *social embeddedness of media use* and the *use elderly people make of ICT,* etc., it became evident too, we should strive – by now – to formulate and carry out such a meta-analysis of the approach at hand.

Notes

1 The specified *action theoretical reference model for the study of TV news use* has been introduced and discussed more extensively elsewhere (cf. Renckstorf & Wester, 1999; Schaap et al., 2001; Konig et al., 1998); the ten *domains of TV news research* discerned by this modeling are: (1) situations, (2) institutions, (3) social network, (4) information, (5) interaction situation, (6) structure of relevances, (7) definition of the situation, (8) action strategies, (9) objectivation, and (10) socialization (see Figure 3).

2 Despite of the fact that cognitive processes of news processing are now gradually better understood, the consequences of *affective processes* remain largely unclear. Consequently, we suggested that *emotional reactions* should be investigated, because they may provide information with evaluations and judgements, as the processing of news consists of both cognitive and affective components. How these components might be intertwined and influence each other, obviously, is difficult to investigate. Therefore, we suggested research on *interpretation differences* of viewers from different backgrounds.

3 Since virtually all of the reviewed fields of communication research; i.e., the *use of public information campaigns, heavy viewing,* and the *use of TV news,* have one main concern in common; i.e., *how and why do people make use of media and mediated messages – and what consequences does this have?,* we choose the title *Media Use in Everyday Life* in order to indicate the efforts of our research program.

4 A more complete overview of the research projects carried out in the past years is available in the Department's Research Assessments 1995, and 2001, respectively (cf. Faculty of Social Sciences/ University of Nijmegen, 1995, 2001).

5 The studies are outlined here by means of the – sometimes slightly revised – *abstracts* of the quoted research publications.

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