

Chapter 10 Researching Audiences: Understanding How Economic News Is Received

Abstract

This chapter will discuss the concepts and practices of audience research. Its purpose is to explore how two widely used methodologies – surveys and focus groups – can be used to unpack how audiences understand the economy. The chapter will examine the strengths and weaknesses of these two approaches and highlight some of the most important issues involved in conducting survey and focus group research. Case studies from the research literature will be presented to illustrate how scholars have utilised these methods to address key issues - such as public support for austerity policies. The chapter will also discuss how these methods can be combined with content studies in order to explore the controversial question of how news accounts can influence public knowledge and understanding in this area.

Advance Organiser

This chapter provides an introduction and overview to audience research as a means of analysing how audiences are influenced by media in their understanding of economic issues. The chapter explores three key qualitative and quantitative methods

- Survey Research
- Focus Groups
- Triangulated Research
- The chapter will explore the three methods including examples of research projects and discusses strengths and weakness of each approach.

Key Readings

Berry, M. (2019) *The Media, the Public and the Great Financial Crisis*. London: Routledge.

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Introduction

The period since the Great Financial Crisis of 2008 has seen an increase in interest in how publics view economic life (e.g. Afoko and Vockins; Berry, 2018, 2019; Duffy et. al. 2013; Killick, 2020; Norrish, 2018; Runge and Hudson, 2020; Schiffres 2015). In part this may reflect concerns that a lack of financial knowledge may have contributed to the crisis. It may also reflect the fact that public knowledge and understanding of economic issues is crucial in an increasingly financialised economy (Martin, 2002). The research that has been undertaken in this area has drawn on a variety of quantitative and qualitative approaches from surveys and experiments to focus groups and ethnography. A key concern of recent studies has been how the public understands the economy and how it is represented in public debate. One strand of this research has explored how the public understands the main economic indicators – such as GDP, debt and inflation – which dominate political and media debate (e.g. Runge and Hudson, 2020). Another approach has involved ‘bottom-up’ research which explores how the public conceptualises the economy. This body of research is primarily qualitative and taps into lay theories and understanding of how the economy functions (Afoko and Vockins; Boyer & Petersen, 2018; Killick, 2020; Norrish 2018).

However a limited number of studies have gone beyond this and attempted to use audience research to try and understand how reporting may impact on public understanding of economic issues (e.g. Barnes and Hicks, 2018; Berry 2019; Reeves and de Vries, 2016). These studies typically combine the use of content studies - to identify dominate themes in reporting – with either surveys, focus groups, experiments or a combination of methods to examine audience responses. Some studies attempt to use experimental or quasi-experimental designs to determine pre-post tests effects whilst others use more qualitative approaches which explore the structures of audience belief and attempt to trace their origins in media accounts.

This chapter will examine two commonly used audience methodologies – surveys and focus groups. It will look at the pros and cons of methods and reflect on the kind of data that they generate. It will also consider key issues in research design such as sampling and data analysis. A case study relating to each will be presented to illustrate how they can be combined with content studies to explore media influence. The chapter will also discuss how different audience methods can be combined in a process of triangulation. This will help illustrate how these methods produce complimentary forms of data which allow reserchers to build up a rich and complex picture about people think, reason and form beliefs It will also equip the reader with the crucial thinking skills necessary to interpret and evaluate audience studies they encounter in the resaerch literature or mass media.

Survey Research

Survey research has traditionally been the most widely used method for researching audiences and is used extensively by the private sector as well as academics. Surveys typically involve participants being asked a set of standardised questions in a set order. This data can be collected in a variety of ways. Traditionally telephone surveys were extremely popular particularly for market research and opinion polling due to their speed, convenience and ability to cover a wide geographical area. However, in recent years they have fallen out of favour because of declining response, cooperation and completion rates (Marken, 2018). Mail surveys were also a popular choice until recently but are slow, expensive, and suffer from low response rates and high abandonment rates. As telephone and mail surveys have declined in popularity internet surveys – which typically involve participants filling in an online questionnaire – have come to dominate. These are cheaper than telephone and mail surveys but are also quick and can reach widely dispersed audiences. They also allow researchers to save time because data collection, analysis and visualisation can all be automated. Finally, surveys can be conducted face-to-face where the interviewer is physically present to ask the questions and assist the respondent. Face-to-face surveys have unique advantages over other approaches. It is easier to conduct longer surveys face to face, there is almost complete control of the research environment, completion rates are very high and this method discriminates less against those with poor reading or writing skills. However, this has to be set against the fact that face to face surveys are slow, expensive, difficult to administer to geographically dispersed populations and are more prone than other methods to interviewer bias.

The key strength of survey-based research is that it can provide insights into how populations are thinking or behaving. A correctly conducted survey of around 1000 people can allow researchers to make probabilistic statements (usually within a margin of error of +/- 3 per cent) about an entire population. The most widely reported example of this kind of survey work is political opinion polling where voters are asked who they are likely to vote for or how they rate a party leader. Despite controversy over the failure of polling companies to correctly call the results of recent elections in the UK and USA, a metanalysis of 31,000 polls covering 351 national elections in 45 countries between 1942 and 2017 found that polling has remained broadly accurate over past decades (Jennings and Wlezien, 2018). However, surveys also suffer from a number of weaknesses in relation to other forms of audience research. Although they are very useful for providing a big picture overview of how a population thinks, the depth of understanding provided by survey research is often shallow. To put it another way, surveys may be effective at telling us what a population thinks or believes but are less able to tell us why. This means they are not as effective as more qualitative methods in allowing us to understand the structure of audience beliefs and attitudes and how these may be based on information gleaned from the mass or social media. For instance, between 2010 and 2015 Yougov (2015) ran a series of tracker polls on public attitudes to austerity. These showed that significant majorities of the population consistently thought cuts to public services to reduce the deficit were necessary and that Labour was most to blame for the cuts. But the research couldn't tell us what assumptions and beliefs underpinned those attitudes. To do this would require the use of qualitative methods like semi-structured interviews, focus groups or ethnographic approaches. Surveys are also a

relatively inflexible method in that the requirement to ask a fixed set of identical questions makes it difficult to adapt when participants respond in unexpected ways.

Key issues in survey research:

This section will highlight some crucial considerations to keep in mind when constructing your own surveys or evaluating the quality of published research. Since surveys are usually intended to be representative so as to be able to generalise the findings to a broader population, sampling is a key issue. The most common form of sampling used to generate a representative sample is probability sampling. To conduct a probability sample the researcher requires a sampling frame and a selection procedure. The selection frame is a list of the entire target population. Within the sampling frame each unit must have an knowable and equal chance of being selected. There are many ways to probabilistically select from the population. One approach is simple random sampling where a random number table or piece of software is used to generate a series of numbers which are then used to draw units from the population. Random digit dialling used in telephone surveys is a commonly used example of this approach. There are also more complex forms of probabilistic selection like cluster or stratified sampling. Increasingly, researchers are also using non-probability sampling to attempt to construct representative samples. Typically these involve the creation of online panels of participants who are weighted to reflect the characteristics of the target population. So the make-up of the sample – although non-randomly selected - should match the target population in relation to key demographics like age, education level, ethnicity, social class or political orientation. However whether non-probability sampling can ever be as accurate as probability sampling in analysing populations is still open to dispute (Wiśniowski et al. 2020).

Another key issue in survey research is questionnaire construction. For instance should you employ open-ended or closed questions. These can often produce very different results. Furthermore although open-ended questions may be seen as producing more authentic responses – because participants are able to respond in their own way – they are much more arduous to complete and discriminate against those with poorer writing skills. Care must also be exercised in how questions are constructed. Questionnaires should avoid the use of ambiguous - or leading questions. Hypothetical questions should be used sparingly – if at all -since people tend to make poor predictions about their future attitudes or behaviours. Researchers must be especially careful with sensitive questions. These can be subject to social desirability dynamics where people do not respond truthfully because they don't want to project a negative image of themselves. For instance, questions on whether a participant has ever failed to declare a source of income to the tax office or regularly makes charitable contributions are vulnerable to socially desirable responses. Finally, researchers need to be aware that certain questions can have agenda setting effects where people feel compelled to come up with an opinion because they don't want to appear ignorant, despite never having considered the issue before. In the sense the opinion is not organic or real but merely an artefact of the research environment. The danger of such responses can be especially high when participants are being questioned about attitudes to specialised economic concepts such as quantitative easing or land value taxation (Berry, 2019). Having sketched some key things

to consider when conducting survey research let's have a look at a study which used this methodology to explore how reporting may influence public attitudes to welfare claimants.

Conducting your own survey: A step by step guide

- 1. Identify your target population and sampling methodology.** For large scale research your target population could be national or even multi-national. Alternatively it could be a sub-set of a national population such as an annual cohort of students or a specific ethnic group. You then need to select a type of either probability or non-probability sample. See chapter 3 of *Researching Communication* (Deacon et al., 2021) for a discussion of different sampling options.
- 2. Decide on the type of survey that are going to use.** The most widely used approaches are internet, phone and face to face surveys.
- 3. Design the survey questions.** Care here must be taken to make sure the questions are easily understood, unambiguous and not vulnerable to socially desirable responses.
- 4. Pilot the survey.** In this stage your survey is tested on a small sample of participants to assess whether all the questions are easily understood and whether any modifiers to the research instrument need to be made.
- 5. Distribute the survey to your sample.** As with any piece of human subjects research you must provide brief orientation to participants and ensure you obtain informed consent.
- 6. Analyse your results.** Researchers usually enter their data into software such as SPSS which can be used to run statistical tests on your data.
- 7. Write up your findings.** Since you will be presenting quantitative data think about using tables, graphs and infomatics to bring your data to life.

Case Study: Media consumption and attitudes to welfare claimants

How might reporting impact on how members of the public view the deservingness of people who claim welfare? This was the subject of a study by Reeves and De Vries (2016) who explored how reporting of the 2011 London riots impacted on public perceptions of welfare claimants. First, Reeves and De Vries established that right of centre newspapers and left of centre newspapers discussed the link between welfare and the riots in very different ways. Whilst most *Guardian/Observer* articles were supportive of welfare claimants – by for instance arguing against removing benefits from convicted rioters – most articles in the *Daily Mail/Mail on Sunday* highlighted a negative association. These included for example blaming the riots on the welfare system and the values it was said to promulgate. The researchers then drew on data from the British Social Attitudes Survey to conduct a quasi-natural experiment where they compared attitudes toward welfare recipients among those interviewed before

and after the riots occurred. To assess how people viewed the deservingness of welfare claimants the researchers relied on three questions:

1. Many people who get social security don't really deserve any help
2. Around here, most unemployed people could find a job if they really wanted one
3. Most people on the dole are fiddling in one way or another.

The research found that prior to the riots there were no significant differences between newspaper readers and non-readers in attitudes to welfare claimants but after the riots views diverged. Newspaper readers – of both left and right-wing titles – became more likely than non-readers to believe that welfare recipients didn't really deserve help, that the unemployed could find a job if they wanted and were being dishonest in claiming benefits.

As they note their results suggest that print media coverage increased negative attitudes towards welfare claimants. However, this effect occurred for readers of both right and left of centre titles which challenges their initial expectation that the effect would only be produced by right-wing newspapers. The researchers note that this may be a function of the small sample size for left-wing newspaper consumers or due to some general impact of newspaper readership that they are not able to explain. This illustrates the limitations of survey based research in that the addition of a qualitative element – for instance semi-structured interviews with readers – might have helped to explain this unexpected finding.

Focus Groups

Focus groups are a qualitative methodology where a researcher brings together a selection of people to discuss their beliefs, knowledge or attitudes. The method originated in the 1940s as a technique used by market researchers to test reactions to radio soap operas. The first use of the method by academics is credited to the sociologist Robert Merton who utilised the approach to test the responses of soldiers to World War II propaganda films such as Frank Capra's 'Why We Fight' (Delli Carpini and Williams 1994). After the war qualitative approaches to audience research fell out of favour in the social sciences – particularly in America where surveys and other forms of quantitative research came to dominate. However, since the 1980s there has been a resurgence of interest in their use in disciplines such as sociology, psychology, political science and media/journalism studies (eg. Gamson 1992; Philo and Berry 2004). They have also been used extensively in political campaigning to test public reactions to candidates, parties and policies.

Focus groups are particularly useful when researchers are trying to understand differences in perspectives between groups or categories of people. For this reason focus groups researchers often recruit groups of people who share a common class position or occupational role (e.g. Philo and Berry, 2004). They are also seen as a good option when researchers are looking for

a range of ideas or feelings that people have about something and how these may emerge in the context of social interaction. However, the most attractive aspect of focus groups is that they allow researchers to observe how people learn, understand, make meaning and form opinions. This potentially offers an opportunity to unpack the various factors that influence opinions, behaviours and motivations. So surveys might be able to tell you that a certain proportion of the population are 'very worried' about the size of the budget deficit but only qualitative approaches like semi-structured interviews or focus groups can tease apart the beliefs, assumptions and values that underpin that opinion.

The kind of data that is generated by focus groups is very different to that produced by survey research. Surveys or structured interviews aim for uniformity and neutrality in order to identify and crystallise – what are believed to be – identifiable and static opinions. But listening to any focus group discussion it is hard to isolate and freeze a set of attitudes. People can be inconsistent and self-contradictory, discussions are full of discontinuities and sometimes go off at a tangent. This can make it very difficult to isolate the individual from the stream of group debate. Yet, it is precisely these difficult aspects of focus groups which are their greatest strengths. Focus groups allow researchers to get beyond static ideas about 'knowledge' or 'attitudes' and explore how participants think, reason and form opinions.

Focus groups have a number of advantages over other approaches to researching audiences. First, they are more naturalistic. Observing people discussing issues – especially if they are already known to each other – is far closer to how people behave and form opinion in real life than filling in an online questionnaire or being prompted by a researcher asking a standardised set of questions down a telephone line. Second, focus groups can produce an unrivalled depth of understanding in relation to the formation of opinion and attitudes by revealing the underlying latent processes of meaning and sense making. As Delli Carpini and Williams (1994: 65) note 'opinions are not simply fixed constructs that are stored and retrieved like data in a computer [but]... are continuously constructed through cognitive processes involving a myriad of complex schema.' These processes are not easily captured through quantitative methods:

Closed-ended survey items often reify opinions by forcing respondents to present them as self-contained and pre-existing objects. The cross-sectional nature of most surveys adds to this static quality. Even panel studies and experimental designs encourage a mechanistic model, in which opinions are measured, new information is introduced, and opinions are remeasured. Focus groups, on the other hand, can be 'catalyst[s] for the individual expression of latent opinion...for free-associating to life' (Liebes and Katz, 1990, p. 28). By essentially forcing people to 'think out loud,' they become windows through which to observe the process of opinion-formation (Delli Carpini and Williams 1994: 65).

Focus groups can also allow researchers to watch opinions and attitudes shift in real-time as new information is introduced into the research environment. For instance in their research on public knowledge and beliefs about the Israeli-Palestine conflict, Philo and Berry (2004) observed how understanding of the conflict could be radically transformed by providing audiences with contextual information about the history of the conflict. Third, focus groups

offer more flexibility than surveys. During focus group sessions it is always possible to probe or clarify something that a participant has said and the focus of the research can be taken in a different direction based on how participants respond. This brings us on to the final advantage of focus groups - they often throw up unexpected findings which cannot be anticipated and are unlikely to be picked up by other methods. A good example of this is reported in the case study which follows, where participants attributed the rise in Britain's deficit after the 2008 Banking Crisis to increased immigration. Although unanticipated - and not recognised in other research in this area - through discussion, the reasoning processes that underlay this belief could be discovered. Focus groups also have weaknesses in comparison to surveys. Their findings are not easily generalisable to broader populations. There is always the danger that opinions can be influenced by peer pressure or dominant individuals in a group. The quality of data is heavily dependent on the skills of researcher and is less easily analysed than quantitative surveys. Interpretations are also more susceptible to the expectations and biases of the researcher and the findings are less easy to replicate than with quantitative methods.

Key Issues in Focus Group Design

Since focus groups are typically concerned with discovering structures of belief or processes of attitude formation- rather than producing findings which can be generalised to larger populations- sampling is less important than with surveys. Most focus group studies employ forms of convenience sampling which are particularly suitable when the researcher is interested in the views of specific demographics. For instance, studies looking at how the public perceive the economy have selected groups based on age, gender and education/social class because these factors are known to impact knowledge and understanding in this area (Runge and Hudson, 2020). Using relatively homogenous groups is also an advantage because it cuts down the possibility that some participants will feel uncomfortable expressing their opinions in front of people who are seen as being more educated, knowledgeable or of higher social status. A central issue in the recruitment of participants is whether to use strangers or groups of people who already know each other. In general, naturally occurring groups are seen as preferable because it is easier to create instant rapport and get participants to open up if they are talking to people they know, rather than complete strangers (Kitzinger, 2005). Many studies have involved researchers questioning groups of friends or colleagues at the residence of one of the participants which has the benefit of a familiar social setting that gives the research an ethnographic feel.

The size of the focus groups must also be carefully considered. Most focus groups use between six and 10 participants though as few as four or as many as 12 is common. Larger groups should provide a wider spectrum of views but limit the amount that any single person can say. So, there is a trade-off between depth and breadth. Larger groups can also appear intimidating to some participants and may make them nervous about expressing opinions.

In terms of how many focus groups to run, as with other qualitative forms of questioning it is advisable to continue until you reach a 'saturation' point where you are hearing the same views and opinion being repeated. Finally, when it comes to the analysis of focus group data it is generally preferable to use an iterative approach where the researcher identifies themes and patterns through listening, transcribing and re-listening to the focus group recordings (Braun and Clarke, 2006)

Conducting your own focus group: A step by step guide

1. Identify and recruit suitable research participants. Your decision making here should be guided by your research focus and questions. For instance, are you interested in differences between various demographic groups? You will also need to decide whether to use strangers or 'naturally occurring' groups.

2. Select a suitable venue for the research. If you are using a naturally occurring group it is often preferable to use the home of one of the participants as this will likely put people at ease and allow the conversation to flow more easily.

3. Select your questions. Focus groups have much greater flexibility than surveys which means that you are not tied into asking a fixed set of questions in a set order and are free to rephrase or clarify questions if the participants do not understand them. Nevertheless researchers should always prepare a set of questions that relate to the study's research focus.

4. Conduct the focus group session. As with survey research you will need to provide your research participants with an initial briefing and obtain informed consent. You will also want to develop a rapport with your participants so that they feel relaxed enough to contribute and keep the conversations on track. Focus group sessions are normally recorded so a much more complete record of conversations can be captured than if the researcher was attempting to make notes in real time. It is advisable to use two recording devices in case one fails.

5. Analysing your results. One common approach is for researchers to listen to the recording and make notes on key themes and patterns that arise in the session. Alternatively, the recordings can be transcribed in their entirety and then either manually analysed by the researcher or entered into specialist software such as Nvivo which can automatically analyse qualitative data.

6. Write up your findings. Here you will want to summarise key patterns in group/individual responses and also use examples of direct quotes from your focus groups to add colour and illustrate how your participants see and understand issues.

Case Study: Media Narratives and Public Understanding of the Deficit Debate

The 2008 Great Financial Crisis led to a sharp increase in worldwide sovereign debt as states sought to prevent a major depression becoming a slump. Berry (2019) examined how the

debates over how to respond to this rise in government debt were covered in the British media and the impact that reporting had on public knowledge and attitudes. To do this it combines thematic content analysis of print and broadcast coverage with the findings of audience focus groups. The content analysis established whilst broadcast media provided accurate accounts as to the reasons behind the rise in government deficit – the contraction in the tax base caused by an usually steep recession – the right-wing featured false claims that historic Labour overspending was to blame. Across both broadcasting and press the rise in the deficit was presented as creating an economic crisis threatening interest rate rises, a currency devaluation - and even national bankruptcy. When it came to how to respond to the rise in the deficit press and broadcast media were united in claiming that austerity measures consisting of regressive tax rises and sharp cuts to public spending were the only possible response.

The focus groups revealed that participants saw the rise in deficit in line with press accounts as being due to Labour overspending. As one participant put it, the problem was "historical overspending as well, even before the crisis happened there has been overspending by government and increasing the debt and the problems trying to service that debt" (Low income group, Glasgow). When it came to which parts of public spending has contributed to the deficit the media also appeared to play an important role. However, it wasn't simply that respondents reproduced the explanations for the deficit that appeared at the time in media texts. Instead, respondents pointed to issues with long term negative media visibility but had little or no impact on the deficit such as welfare payments, quangos, foreign aid and the EU. Unexpectedly immigration was cited in nine out of the 16 focus groups, and it was particularly prominent as an explanation in groups of low income or older participants where it was often the first factor that was identified. In one group a participant spoke of immigrants 'taking all the money and bleeding it dry' (Low income group, Glasgow). In another group a participant spoke of how letting in more people meant that the 'books are not going to balance'. A key reason for such beliefs were emotive reports in the press on benefit fraud or welfare payments made to immigrants. As one participant put it:

Look at that one a month ago in the paper she had ten passports for claiming for ten people. It was all illegal immigrants and she was claiming that they had kids and all the rest of it. (Low income group, Glasgow)

Three conclusions flow from these focus group findings. Public understanding of the contours of public spending is extremely limited, the public falsely sees the economy as akin to a fixed container and citizens will overestimate the contribution of issues that have high, sustained, negative visibility in the media, especially if media accounts focus on emotive and atypical cases whose existence is then taken to be widespread. This illustrates the need for journalists to routinely put statistics on state expenditure into context so the public is better informed about the relative sizes of different elements of the public spending 'pie'.

When it came to how to respond to the deficit the measures that participants identified closely matched both in occurrence and frequency what appeared in broadcasting and the press. However this didn't necessarily mean that people accepted the legitimacy of these policies or

were unable to go beyond them and suggest alternatives. For instance, in the focus groups there was widespread opposition to cuts to frontline services despite such arguments being strongly made in press accounts. Nevertheless, press reporting appeared significant in building support for cuts to other areas. For instance, a number of respondents echoed the argument prominent in newspaper accounts - that 'gilt-edged' public sector pensions were being unfairly subsidised in comparison to those in the private sector and should be reduced.

Questions of affordability were strongly linked by focus groups members with what was seen the scale of the debt and this reflected the threatening narratives that were common in the media. One participant, who despite having voted Labour, described them as a 'worst government in the last 100 years or whatever' who had 'led the country into a disaster owe money all over the damn place, got this national debt that's zooming up' (Middle class group, Warwickshire).

Media accounts also appeared to influence the belief that waste in the public sector was so widespread that the deficit could be reduced primarily through efficiency savings. A common complaint was too many non-jobs or administrators - as one respondent put it 'you go into any hospital there are nearly as many administrators as there are doctors or nurses, they could away with them, they didn't have them years ago' (Senior citizens, Glasgow).

Finally, the study examined whether alternatives to austerity – such as the introduction of a Land Value Tax or Financial Transaction Tax -which were being pushed by the trade unions and the fringes of the Labour left would be familiar to audiences. However, virtually nobody had heard of these alternatives reflecting their invisibility in mainstream media accounts.

Triangulation

In many ways survey and focus groups provide complementary types of information about audiences so it is not surprising that many studies combine the two approaches in order to build up a more comprehensive picture of how people think. For instance, Runge and Hudson (2020) used 12 focus groups and a nationally representative online YouGov survey of adults to explore how British people view six economic concepts: inflation, unemployment, GDP, interest rates, trade, and deficit and debt. The survey tested their knowledge of these indicators and how much they were trusted. This revealed that indicators closer to people's everyday lives like inflation tended to be better understood than more remote concepts like GDP. The survey also revealed that knowledge in this area was highly stratified with socio-economic status, education levels, age and gender all impacting how knowledgeable, confident and interested people were in these economic statistics. The focus groups broadened this knowledge base by exploring how people conceptualised these indicators. A key finding that emerged was that most people could only see the economic indicators through their own personal lens and struggled to understand how they related to the economy as a whole. So although most people understood raising interest rates would make their mortgages more expensive, few could understand why the Bank of England would raise rates or what impact it would have on the aggregate economy.

Surveys or focus groups can also be combined with other forms of audience research. So Barnes and Hicks (2018) utilised survey data from the British Social Attitudes Survey, a form of automated content analysis called structured topic modelling and an experimental survey to explore how media narratives impacted on public attitudes towards fiscal policy. The structural topic modelling revealed that right of centre newspapers were more pro-austerity than left of centre titles and the data from the BSAS showed that pro-austerity attitudes correlated with readership of right of centre newspapers - even after controlling for political affiliation and a host of other demographic factors. The experimental survey which involved exposing participants to messages that either emphasised or downplayed the dangers of large deficits (similar to arguments in the *Guardian* and *Telegraph*) found that exposure to *Guardian* messages made people less deficit averse but viewing *Telegraph* messages had no impact. The authors explain this finding by speculating that negative deficit messages were so common in the media in preceding years, that exposure to one additional message would have been unlikely to have had an additional impact on participants.

Conclusion

This chapter set out to examine different methodological approaches to studying audiences and how – when combined with content studies – they can be used to draw conclusions about media influence. As has been demonstrated surveys and focus groups produce very different data about audiences. Surveys are useful for the big picture overview of how populations think about a subject but provide a relatively shallow account of public opinion. In contrast, focus groups are useful for unpacking the structure of audience beliefs. So focus groups can tell you how people form opinions as well as the beliefs and knowledge that underpin them. They also allow researchers to trace the source of opinions and explore the conditions under which audiences accept or reject messages they encounter in the media. However, to build up the most complete picture of how audiences see the world and are susceptible to media influence it is best to use a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods in a process of triangulation.

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