Provocation: Why I want to talk television with global platform representatives

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Abstract
Interviews with industry workers and decision-makers are a critical method in television studies. Yet, one group of informants proves particularly hard to access—representatives from global media platforms. Why is it so hard to get interviews with global platform representatives, and what does the lack of access do to our research and scholarly debate?

Keywords
Access, elites, exclusive informants, global platforms, qualitative interviews, television studies

During the past 5 years, I have been lucky enough to participate in three large-scale research projects on media industry change. Critical questions have been how streaming is changing the cultural industries, how a disrupted media industry calls for new policy solutions and how television makers produce and distribute drama in an increasingly globalised television market. Interviews with industry élites (Hertz and Imber, 1995) and so-called exclusive informants (Bruun, 2016) have been a critical method in all three projects. The aim has been to investigate industry strategies and ‘industry lore’ (Havens and Lotz, 2012), that is, how industry decision-makers think and talk about the changes taking place. In total, the three projects include interviews with more than one hundred and fifty managers, industry executives, decision-makers and producers from the Norwegian film, television, news, music and book industry, in addition to several media policymakers and regulators (see more, Ihlebæk and Sundet, 2021; Sundet, 2021a; Sundet and Colbjørnsen, 2021). The television industry list includes broadcasting directors and
CEOs from major television companies, award-winning showrunners and producers, strategic leaders of drama, children and youth divisions, national online platform representatives, below-the-line workers, and more. Access to informants has been critical, and, with some glaring exceptions that I will return to, I have been fortunate to have informants willing to participate and share their opinions on trends, opportunities, challenges and strategies.

In one of the projects, studies also included lengthy periods of ethnographic research during which an even more profound level of access was granted: in 2015, I followed the production of an online youth series for close to a year, analysing how a newspaper-turning-online-television-provider translated ‘television’ in their new production and publishing routines (Sundet, 2016). Two years later, I followed the production of a public service online drama for a year, investigating the production logic behind this format and the close industry–audience relationship it invited (Sundet, 2021a, 2021b). In each of the cases, I had to negotiate access; however, both production teams had an open and welcoming attitude towards me as an outside researcher. In the latter case, I was even granted an admission card, given access to internal working documents and analytical tools, and invited to decide which meetings or parts of the production I was interested in observing. All this is to say that I find the Norwegian media industry remarkably willing to participate in media industry studies and provide researchers with perspectives on how to understand the current changes taking place, how these changes affect them, and how they navigate this landscape.

Naturally, the level of openness varies, and informants will frequently avoid questions, withhold information and turn to ‘corporate talk’ when asked about strategies and business models. As such, industry informants possess power and function as ‘gatekeepers of information’ (Bruun, 2016: 132). While some informants are formal and corporate from start to end, others include gossip and off-the-record stories, knowing our research ethic prohibits us from quoting them without their consent. Their statements are valuable anyway. And even strategic communication and ‘corporate talk’ is significant, precisely because it uncovers strategies at work. As argued by Bruun (2016: 142), industry informants should be expected to have ‘agendas’ when partaking in interviews, and identifying such agendas should be part of the research findings. Furthermore, tapping into industry workers’ ‘worldviews’ through interviews contextualise their strategic thinking and provide researchers with a better grasp of the many ‘why’s’ and ‘how’s’. Industry ‘worldviews’ also gives valuable insight into executives’ ‘working notions’ (Sundet and Ytreberg, 2009) and ‘sense making’ (Weick, 1995), that is, the shared cognitive frames and perceptions executives build on when planning for the future. I have always treasured interviews as a golden ticket for knowledge and information. And it is the perfect method for getting quotations to spice up academic texts. Sometimes, interviews even function as door openers for long-standing professional relationships between industry workers and scholars, inspiring collaboration – and new research.

Strikingly, but not surprisingly, one group of people has been hard to reach: informants representing global media platforms – Netflix, HBO, YouTube and Google. In one of the projects, we managed to get an interview with a Facebook representative (Ihlebæk and Sundet, 2021), and in another, we got an informant from Spotify (Sundet and Colbjørnsen, 2021).
2021). Besides these two, however, representatives from global platforms kept turning our interview requests down, even when we proposed long time horizons (interviews within the next 1–3 months) and informed them of their right to approve any quotes and withdraw at any time. We were repeatedly told by global platform representatives that they ‘did not have time’ or ‘did not have anything to say’, if they even answered at all (and yes, we tried using industry contacts to set us up, but taking part was nevertheless an opt-out). This phenomenon is called ‘cold calling’ in the literature on élite interviewing (Thomas, 1995). We may have been incredibly unlucky but discussing this issue with other scholars led me to think it is a more frequent problem for researchers approaching global platform representatives. And it is problematic.

I understand the difficulties of finding time in a busy schedule. I also understand the challenges of discussing strategy work in national markets when you represent a global brand, most of them with headquarters in the United States. Many global platforms are stock companies, meaning they carefully monitor and control information flows. Some global platforms further define themselves as tech firms, not media companies, meaning they are less regulated than national legacy news and public service media – and less tuned in to serve public debates. Global platforms may even have less to gain from partaking in such discussions because their existence is not dependent on their relationship to either national policymakers or the national publics (Jin, 2020). I also accept that national media companies have tighter relationships with national researchers. A fair share of the industry workers and decision-makers we interviewed had their background and training from the universities approaching them for research purposes. For instance, in the projects mentioned above, I have interviewed both old classmates and master students, now holding key positions in the industry. Trust is also an issue here as industry workers and individual researchers often negotiate access over time after partaking in the same industry events and sharing analyses and data. For example, in one of the ethnographic studies mentioned above, I gained access to the production team after attending several industry workshops and proving knowledge of the specific production at hand. As argued by Kirsten Frandsen (Frandsen, 2007: 48), interview access can take the form of a ‘trade’ or a ‘gift’, indicating the different expectations interviewees have of partaking. Yet, global platform representatives may be unwilling to confirm any of them. The lack of access to information on, and informants with, representatives from global platforms is nevertheless troublesome for three reasons.

First, global platforms increasingly take key positions in national markets, highlighting the need to study them. Research on platform power shows how global platforms radically change institutional dynamics and that national media institutions increasingly need to cope with an uneven playing field (Evens and Donders, 2018; Van Dijk et al., 2018). Constant new acquisitions in the streaming market increase the power of global giants (Ravindran, 2021). Even though national streaming services still hold relevance in the Norwegian market, global streaming platforms such as Netflix, YouTube and Disney+ have gained central positions. In 2021, 73% of Norwegians subscribe to at least one streaming platform, many to more than one, and Netflix is undoubtedly the biggest one (Futsæther, 2020). The use of global platforms is exceptionally high in younger audience groups (12–19 years), who tend to consume global rather than national media (Strømmen,
The COVID-19 pandemic, with its quest for social distancing and lockdown, has increased the use of streaming platforms (national and global) even more (Dumitrescu and Futsæther, 2021), echoing findings from studies in other national markets (Johnsen and Dempsey, 2020). Surveys also show that global streaming services take a lion share of revenues: only 1/3 of streaming revenues goes to Norwegian streaming services (Jortveit, 2021). Relatedly, several industry leaders we interviewed talked about a shift from a ‘national competition to a world championship’, with real consequences for both the industry, the audience and society (Sundet, 2021a). Many informants also reported massive strategy work to harness the opportunities of the new ‘world championship’ – and alleviating the unfortunate consequences. Hence, although platform power is a general problem, the effect of platform power cannot be adequately addressed on a general level. As argued by Ramon Lobato (2019), there is no operative ‘Netfl ix effect’ on a global scale, noting instead that Netflix should be seen as a ‘collection of national media services tied together in one platform rather than as a uniform global service’ (Lobato: 182–184).

In short, global giants adapt to national settings, and national players respond to these adaptations. Researching global platforms within different national markets is, therefore, essential. Second, secondary sources on global platforms and their strategies and actions are valuable but cannot replace industry interviews as a critical method to investigate scholarly defined research questions. Hanne Bruun (2016) uses the term ‘exclusive informants’ (rather than ‘elite informants’) precisely because these individuals possess the expert knowledge that the researcher needs to access to assure the quality of his or her research. These informants are irreplaceable, and they demonstrate their power by accepting or refusing to participate. Admittedly, media industry studies have often relied on multiple sources and paratexts – including institutional documents, annual reports and leadership talks on YouTube, press coverage, biographies, fan texts and branding material. Indeed, excellent studies apply these sources when investigating industry–audience relations (Gray, 2010; Hills, 2015), global streaming services (Jenner, 2018; Johnsen, 2019; Lobato, 2019) and television marketing strategies (Burroughs, 2018; Grainge and Johnson, 2015; Troy, 2015; Wayne, 2017). I have also enjoyed the books on former Apple-boss Steve Jobs (Isacson, 2011), former Disney-boss Robert Iger (Iger, 2019) and current Netflix-boss Reed Hastings (Hastings and Meyer, 2020), precisely because they give a peek into these leaders’ perceptions on leadership and technology shifts. Yet, the use of such industry texts presents these companies and leaders in the way they want to be presented and they seldom answer all the research questions one would have. Besides, the lack of transparency on audience numbers, business strategies and internal guidelines (and more!) mean these platforms give details on some aspects of their activities while withholding information on others, making a real investigation hard. Relying on secondary sources also makes it more challenging to compare industry strategies and perceptions across companies and industries, a key aim of the projects mentioned above. Of course, secondary sources also request scholars to accept the original context in which these sources were produced, making it harder to validate their truthfulness. These other methods also often fail to map shared perceptions and industry lore, which industry
interviews do so well. In short, élite and exclusive interviews is a profound method for asking critical, research-driven questions and map industry worldviews.

Third, and more fundamentally, I want to talk about television with global platform representatives precisely because I want to understand their worldview, way of thinking and rationale. I also fear that the unusually welcoming approach from national legacy media in combination with the extraordinarily non-welcoming approach by global media platforms may bias my way of thinking about television. How do global platforms talk about television and to what extent do they differ from legacy television institutions? What do they see as the main opportunities and challenges at hand? How do they define the relationship with national producers, broadcasters and regulators? And how do their definitions and perceptions of television, success and audiences impact and nuance our research and scholarly debate? I am not asking for a long ethnographic study within a global platform (but hell, yes, I would do it!). But I find it only fair to ask that global platforms gaining key positions in national markets display a minimum level of openness towards researchers (and others). I also fear that the dismissive attitude of global platforms may spread to national television players, meaning that the latter also adopt a more restrictive attitude towards researchers and research activities. That would definitively be a significant loss for everyone. Studies of media policy processes indicate the benefit of partaking in scholarly and public debates as it involves the creation of collective frames on what the real problem is and how to solve it (Steen-Johnsen et al., 2019). Studies also show how public service broadcasters, in particular, prove skilful in creating such frames by building on long-term coalitions and alliances characterised by deeply held beliefs (Van den Bulck and Donders, 2014). Partaking may, therefore, even benefit global platforms, as it invites researchers and others to understand their rationale and worldview.

Author’s note

This article is an updated and expanded version of a blog with the same title, first published on CSTOnline, 12 February 2021. The research projects referred to in the article is the ‘Success in the film and television’ project (SIFTI, hosted by the Lillehammer University College from 2013–2016); the ‘Disruptive change and new media policies: a field approach’ project (DISC, hosted by the Norwegian Institute for Social Research from 2016–2020); and the ‘Streaming the culture industries’ project (STREAM, hosted by University of Oslo from 2017–2021). The Research Council of Norway funded all three projects.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

This article is produced in association with the University of Oslo research project titled “Streaming the culture industries,” funded by the Research Council of Norway under Grant Number 263076.
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