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Researching media reality: Using experience and theory to explain how media make our world.

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Overview

This lesson plan outlines a 10-week media research training program. On its completion, students will be able to:

- Use critical theories of media influence.
- To explain how media make social reality.
- Connect 'new' media problems with foundational questions in the field.
- Design and execute original research projects.

The unit has two sections. The first maps defining features of critical media research. We start with three examples of how media actively create the world; the role of entertainment in shaping public thought; the political impact of digital sharing practices; and the interactions between culture and communications technologies. Next, we consider the social responsibility of our work. Finally, students are introduced to a research model, providing sequence for transforming a research interest into a research question.

The second section involves methodological training and exercises. These tasks give experience in researching media industries, media content, the geographical and economic impacts of media industries on urban centres, the role of audiences in making social history, and media policy. Written with an eye toward general, historical trends in media research, the following lesson plans can be integrated into a variety of units. For example, the first half might be suitable for an intro to media class, where the second is ideal for upper-level research training. Each session includes:

- Curated readings, reflecting vital contemporary questions about media, society and power.
- Explanatory notes on how these readings reflect well-established themes in media theory.
- Reading questions, identifying significant passages in the readings.
- Practical exercises, designed to apply the conceptual lessons from the readings to practical research exercises.

Using student experience in learning theory and method.

Three core challenges in teaching media studies are:

- Getting students to think about media power beyond issues of bias, misrepresentation and persuasion.

- Explaining that being critical does not mean assuming that media industries set out to harm societies.
- Empowering students to produce meaningful, interesting, experience-based media research.

The syllabus aims to overcome these obstacles by introducing a new taxonomy of media research, with associated workshop exercises that demonstrate the *accessibility* of media research practice. The module provides a step-by-step approach to experience-based research training in qualitative methods. The workshops chart a path allowing students to ground research training in their own experiences of media power in action. Students will learn to appreciate how to locate personal media experiences in broader historical and cultural contexts. This activity achieves two outcomes. First, it cultivates the capacity to break global media cultures down into meaningful and researchable 'scenes'. Second, it introduces students to a range of theoretically sensitized methods that can be used to gather and analyse readily available evidence of media power in action.

Lessons connect experience and learning in two ways. First, through exercises that encourage students to reflect on their media experiences by recording them, in detail, and then sharing these accounts with peers. The essential learning outcome of the module is that media become potent by offering a plenitude of undemanding solutions to social needs. Ergo, compelling instances of media power in action live in banalities of the routine media uses. Using such quotidian details to reflect on similarities in personal experiences, is a valuable exercise in learning *where* to find evidence of media in action. Learning how to ask yourself about how media has shaped you is a great way to understand what you should ask other media professionals and users.

Rationale

Critical media studies aspire to treat its students as research partners (Turner, 2013); this partnership is especially valuable as global media power shifts, in both nature and scholarly conceptualization. The cultural studies branch of media research built its reputation by translating experience into robust, globally impactful research traditions. Feminist media studies, for instance, was significantly developed by a generation of graduate students who felt unrepresented in the media research of the 1970s (McRobbie and Graber 1978). Member Angela McRobbie is a renowned expert on feminism and the cultural industries. Her determination to decipher what her memories of being a girl in post-war Britain revealed about the relations between culture, media, history and power was a significant driver of this success. McRobbie's story is not idiosyncratic. Since media power becomes real in the concrete circumstances of everyday life, the question of what that force feels like is a weighty historical question. Thus, it makes sense to root research training in students' own media stories. After all, this practice has produced some of our leading scholars.

Today's students have witnessed media changes, likened by some to the Industrial Revolution. New technologies, business models, governance practices, and uses have altered how we live as individuals, citizens, workers, families; you name it (Hepp 2013; Hjarvard 2013). One example would be the so-called 'mediatization' of politics, where the injunction to perform public office has transformed political leadership. Donald Trump's tweets, Vladimir Putin's interviews with

Oliver Stone, Barack Obama's bon mots, Jeremy Corbyn's appearance at the Glastonbury Music Festival and Patrick Trudeau's trolling of *Friends*' star Matt Perry; there are not quirks, but symptoms of transformed political communication. We may miss the days before Twitter diplomacy and celebrity politicians, but they are gone.

The Industrial Revolution metaphor is useful since it creates the opportunity to reflect on the role of human experience in conceiving grand historical change. Historians of that period taught us why stories of how it felt to live through social upheavals are invaluable resources. Grasping why this so helps to explain the logic of the training activities offered in these workshops. E. P. Thompson, the author of *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), provides enlightening answers that make a place for experience in media research training. There are parallels between Thompson's advice on making sense of the Industrial Revolution, and the present challenges students face in learning how to research media. Revolution-industrial, or digital-implies sweeping changes that affect all. Demographic and economic data from England's 1780-1820 period unequivocally evidenced huge change; where people lived, how long they lived for, what they did, and how much they earned between the two dates measured the change. Such data was necessary, and could only be harvested and explained by well-trained, well-resourced, experienced scholars, who had years to spend pouring over data. Yet for Thompson, there was more to the Industrial Revolution story. What did the period look like on the ground? How could such perspectives explain the logic of apparently spontaneous, contemporaneous phenomena, such as the strange explosion of enthusiasm for evangelical Christianity among the working poor? How could such anomalies be made sensible? These were important pursuits in grasping the social reach of the Industrial Revolution. It doesn't really matter if the 'Digital Revolution' is or isn't as seismic; what counts is the observation that how the change seems from within is a notable question. So, it is worth noting that media education has a long history of learning from Thompson's evaluation of experience.

McRobbie had lived with several notable post-war changes; the reconstruction of a gender order, state management of women's reproductive power, the emergence commercialised teen pop culture and the growth of television. Her observations of these phenomena directed her work. This career, we can say, was shaped by her status as a witness to change. Coming to today's classrooms, we find many people who have seen similarly grand changes. These students are vital witnesses to media history, which is why they can contribute to the discipline.

Media Teachers have been here before. In World War Two Britain, media education became a pressing national concern. Nazi propaganda threatened national morale. Glicksberg (1942) suggested bolstering children's resilience by making them look very carefully at Fascist fare. He also encouraged them to produce counter-propaganda messages, using the exercise to reflect on their place in the war. Tragically, the distinct possibility at this point was that many of the children who sat in these lessons were likely to end up on the front line; hence media education became part of a life skills project where children could begin to consider their futures.

There's a thrillingly modern feel to this historical example; where the focus is on not only critical thinking and making media (as advocated by scholars such as Buckingham 1998 and Gauntlett 2011). And it's worth pointing out that this example echoed other work, using witnessing to improve cultural history. The school propaganda project was modelled on the Mass Observations

project. Started in the 1930s by a team of anthropologists and writers, the mass observations project set out to archive the details of ordinary life in Britain. The project sought volunteers to who was willing to record responses to 'directives'-assignments where people would record their experiences of everyday activities like working, shopping, listening to the radio, eating, and going to the movies. Sometimes respondents were also asked about their opinions on national political events; the abdication of Edward VIII, for example (Sheridan 1993).

It quickly became apparent theses accounts were a vital historical resource. With the advent of World War Two, 'observer' reports provided a vital alternative account of public feeling that was often used to challenge other accounts of historical truths. The "Blitz Spirit" is an example. When the UK suffers terror attacks today, the "Blitz Spirit" is often name-checked as an index of a deep-seated, historical resilience. It refers to the British's public's reaction to German bombing during World War Two; a tactic which is deemed to have failed to instill defeatism among a sturdy public. This version of historical reality continues to bear a political significance.
In that sense, it's worth pointing out that mass observers of the time noted that the "Blitz Spirit" concept painted with an overly broad brush. In particular, observers noted different reactions to the early German bombing raids of 1941 and the VE 1 and 2 Luftwaffe campaigns of 1944-5. The latter, conducted as a war-weary public awaited Allied victory, produced widespread angst (Bell 2009). Naturally, this was noted by a self-selected sample; there was no way of knowing how far the reports reflected a general public mood (Sheridan 1993). Nevertheless, such demurring accounts showed the "Blitz Spirit" concept was an incomplete picture of the public mood at this time. As a result, the Mass Observations Archive did become recognised as a significant resource in the historical analysis of public opinion (Bell 2009). The take-home lesson? Aggregated accounts of direct experiences of social change impact public knowledge.

Hence the mass observation project provides a method for applying McRobbie's example and Thompson's historical insights to the practice of media research training. Today's media students are the mass observers of their day. If given properly thought out 'directive' writing instructions, they can produce historically and culturally insightful accounts of what it has been like to live the digital revolution, at a time when scholars are trying to figure out whether such a thing has happened, to who, and to what effect.

General Timeline

The following presents a 10-week tutorial plan. The goals are:

- Introducing students to key concepts and methods through curated readings, highlighting noteworthy quotes from those pieces, with associate comprehension questions.
- Allowing students to practice qualitative research methods.

At the end of the unit, students should be able to identify a research project and write a proposal for studying media culture in action.

Detailed Lesson Plan

Week 1: Media Realities

The goal of this workshop is to encourage you to think about *your* media realities. The big idea is to appreciate that media are 'real' in the sense that they shape what we do and in many cases what we expect of the world. Examples include:

- they organize our time
- shape how we act in public and private spaces
- provide compelling stories that we use to make sense of what's happening around us
- mediate social relationships.

Key readings:

> Van den Bulck, J., & Vandebosch, H. (2003). When the viewer goes to prison: learning fact from watching fiction. A qualitative cultivation study. Poetics, 31, 103-116.
>
> Gibson, M. (2014) Tchk, tchk, tchk: Skippy the Bush Kangaroo and the question of Australian seriousness, Continuum, 28:5, 574-582.

Key concept.

Media make social reality. They provide us with ideas that we use in daily life, influence how we work and relax, mediate the relationships we have with others, guide beliefs and expectations, and provide a constant anchor in the social world. The readings and exercises for this week explain what this means, and how we can use these ideas in research.

Why does the concept matter?

The readings and exercises for this week enable reflection on how media shape how we perceive and experience the social world. Each reading has been selected to demonstrate alternative versions of the process.

Van den Bulck and Vandebosch's work used cultivation analysis; a well-known theory on how crime stories affect audiences (Gerbner 1998). Cultivation analysts argue that crime dramas are so familiar that they influence what viewers expect to happen when they meet real law enforcement officers (Gross 2009). Van den Bulck and Vandebosch studied this phenomenon in detail by talking to novice convicts, going to gaol for the first time. This small study just asked a small group of people how media influence works when encountering a new situation that you have seen 'modelled' in screen dramas countless times. Hopefully, you'll be able to apply this method elsewhere. For example, what's it like being a tourist in a famous place? Does the real experience live up to the media based expectation?

Gibson's piece explores how media ground identity in history. He uses childhood memories to reflect on a crucial period of Australian media development; the emergence of the nation's first global TV hit (*Skippy, the Bush Kangaroo)*. The methodological lesson at hand is to link everyday experiences within the structures of media industries and history; in this case, Gibson experienced childhood in a particular way because of the connection between viewing and leisure afforded by a historically significant 'boom' in Australian TV.

These readings tell us why it is worth paying attention to daily media experiences, and the exercises that follow provide steps to put these ideas into practice.

Practicing the concepts

The methodological point is that stories about everyday encounters with the media are potentially rich sources of data, regarding how media affect the world. These stories are not only anecdotes, but also accounts of what it is like to live within the rules of particular times, places and institutions. Stories explain how media are integrated across diverse settings-whether it be taking first nervous steps into prison, or recalling what it was like to grow up in Australia during the 1970s. The fact that we can speak of such disparate situations in the same breath emphasizes how media are scenery for many real social stages Having read this outline, students can now read the set articles, knowing that they are reviewing different approaches to explaining media's reality effect. They will also practice qualitative methods by writing stories of their own experiences.

Icebreaker: 20 mins

Arrange students into pairs. One partner spends a minute explaining why they are interested in media research. Their respondent then talks their ideas back to them. Have they explained themselves clearly? Then swap partners. The person who did the listening in round 1 does the talking this time. This is a way to a) get the class talking b) get the class talking to each other.

Unit Guide:

Show short video on navigating Moodle. Go through the assessment with the students. Field any questions.

Directive One: Write about your experience of media power. 20 mins

Step 1. Brainstorm.

What are the main themes of each reading? What are the connections between them? Why do you think you have been asked to read them?

Step 2. Apply the ideas.

The readings for this week reflect two kinds of media reality making. Van den Bulck and Vandebosch interview Belgian prisoners, and discover that people who find themselves in

familiar media places-that is, places that they have often seen on TV or in the movies-often draw on media narratives to make sense of what is happening to them. Alternatively, Gibson reflects on how global TV organised his childhood.

It's quite common for media scholars to ground research in personal experience. The trick is to connect times in your life where you have felt media power in action to social, economic, cultural and historical forces that create the frameworks of personal media experience. Being able to connect the *experience* with the *frame* is a useful first research step.

Practice by performing one of the following three tasks. The exercise draws on methods used in the famed "Mass Observations" project. Started in the 1930s, Mass Observations recorded panels of ‘observers' of daily life in Britain. They were asked to write reports on many aspects of everyday life-going to work, going shopping, going to the cinema, listening to the radio. The University of Sussex archived the accounts, and the data challenged conventional histories of World War II. Hence, this method has been used to create valid insights into cultural experiences, and in later tutorials, we are going to use these accounts to practice research techniques that students can use in the field.

1. "First encounters."

Write the story of the first encounter that you can remember with one of the following. Please pick the one that you can remember best.

Television
The Internet
Mobile Phones
Movies
Video Games
Social media

How old were you at the time? Where were you living? Can you remember what else happened on that day? Why did you use your chosen medium on that day? How did it make you feel?

2. "Emotional experiences."

Please write about a time when using the media made you feel:

Excited
Happy
Afraid
Angry
Envious
Ambitious

Please pick the example that you recall the best.

3. "Media events."

Pick a special media event; going to a movie that you've been looking forward to seeing; a meeting with a celebrity; attendance at a concert or sporting contest; 'must-see TV', like the final of a television talent show.

Describe how you prepared for the event. Is this something that you spent a lot of time discussing with friends and family? Did you make any special arrangements for viewing the event-picking your company, making/taking food, combining the event with other social opportunities (like going to dinner, for example)? What were your expectations? Were they met? Were you disappointed? Can you say why?

4. Expectations.

Have you ever met a real celebrity? Or been somewhere that you've seen many times on television (Paris? London? Melbourne?). When you faced the real thing, were your expectations met, or were you disappointed? Why do you think you reacted as you did?

Week 2: How do media do things?

Part 1. Understanding Technological determinism. 30 mins

Key concept.

Wikileaks was innovative as a business practice. We need to be wary of the idea of change, in the sense that its success depended on its capacity to mesh with hegemonic practices, and indeed it spurned a new generation of such practices.

> Hasian, M. (2012). Watching the domestication of the Wikileaks helicopter controversy. *Communication Quarterly*, *60*, 190-209.
>
> McNair, B. (2012). Wikileaks, journalism and the consequences of chaos. *Media International Australia*, *144*, 77-86

Why does the concept matter? Media, technology and progress.

Last week, we introduced students to the idea that society, history and economy converge within media practices. We continue that theme this week with *WikiLeaks*. Set readings are the latest incarnation of a familiar critical position in media studies; that the history of communication technology is *not* necessarily a tale of progress.

Back in the 1950s, the Canadian Economic historian Harold Innis (2008) argued that for all its claims to democratic value, the North American news industry of the 19th century mattered most to the logging industry; the desire for daily news was a great way of selling lots of paper. Hence ‘breaking news' reflected the economic significance of communications technologies.

Wikileaks activates significant historical questions about media technology and democracy. Generally speaking, Hasian's reading reflects Innis' scepticism. McNair adopts a more optimistic tone, observing that digital whistleblowing carries formidable emancipatory power. Try and use these ideas to decipher the meaning of these quotes:

"The activities of WikiLeaks present the most dramatic example to date of the capacity of digital communication networks to subvert the control of official information once enjoyed by political and other elites and to shape the news agenda in ways that have the potential to seriously disrupt the exercise of power." (McNair 2012 77)

"Critics of the Iraqi intervention may have hoped that the release of the Apache video materials would mobilize the efforts of dissenters or raise more public support for hasty exit strategies, but they soon found that this clash of images could also galvanize the efforts of those who wished to defend the status quo and valorize the efforts of those who fought against the insurgents in Iraq." (Hasian 2012 192)

Discussion Question.

Would you say Hasian is dismissing or qualifying McNair's statement?

Students should pick up on the significance of the words 'capacity' and 'potential' in the McNair piece. The point is that these same capacities also 'galvanized' new PR strategies in the military. Have students raise other points that they want to discuss about the readings.

Practising the concepts.

The great thing about being a media scholar is that data surrounds you. Ironically, this evidence is hard to see because it is plentiful. You can hardly go anywhere without seeing people using media, or encountering advertising, social media posts, breaking news and the like. You have to get used to looking at hard at apparently ordinary, even dull things that people say and do with media to figure out the extraordinary way that phones, tablets, televisions, computers and the like stitch us into global communication systems. So we are going to stay with the accounts that we wrote last week. You should approach these reports as puzzles that very much match real, professional research challenges; how to generate engaging insights from superficially unremarkable descriptive accounts. In this instance, we will look for evidence of technological encounters, and the things that explain whether these contacts were positive, negative, or perhaps a confusing mix of both.

Exercise: Reading accounts of technology use.

Swap the media biography that you wrote with a partner. Read your partner's account. Answer the following two questions:

1. Is there any part of this account where media technology or content appears to have 'forced' change on your partner, or their family?

2. What are some of the things other than media content or technology that made your partner's event memorable?
3. Present your answers to your partner. Does your s/he find them to be plausible?

Week 3: Social Media and Culture

Marwick, A., & Ellison, N. (2012). 'There isn't wifi in heaven!' Negotiating visibility on Facebook memorial pages. *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 56, no. 3: 378-400.

Carroll, B., & Landry, K. (2010). Logging On and Letting Out: Using Online Social Networks to Grieve and to Mourn. *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society*. 30: 341-349.

Key concept.

Media technologies are 'cultural' in the sense that their success depends on their capacity to occupy symbolic traditions.

Why does the concept matter?

We've encountered two ideas so far; that media make realities that reflect the industrial needs of technology producers and the circumstances of their use. What we to do now is synthesise these processes.

An integrated approach to media systems is vital in the social media age. Cybercrime, sexting, surveillance, online dating; all seem chaotic, unpredicted outcomes of rapid changes in how we communicate. But unpredictability is explainable. With reflection, we can easily see how something as strange as the new phenomenon of online mourning has clear historical and theoretical origins.

For instance, we can use ritual theory to make sense of social media. Identified with writers like James Carey (1989) and Nick Couldry (2003), ritual theory introduces the surprising idea that media power works by changing *nothing.* As Carey noted, societies have always relied on communication to preserve their values and ways of life, and the thing that accounts for the impact of commercial media industries is the ease with which they provide solutions to perennial symbolic problems around; such as how to communicate our feelings about mortality. An eternal mystery, we've always sought the meaning of life through death, and the impact of social media on mourning practices are but variations on a theme; our understanding of the meaning of life and death depends on the symbolic practices surrounding each (Turner 1978).

Try the following discussion questions bearing those ideas in mind.

Discussion questions.

What is context collapse, and how does it explain media effects? What sort of effects do these

take?

What are scalability, persistence, search-ability, and replicability, and how do they explain the impact of social media?

"Grounded theory-a conceptual framework for categorizing the emerging social practices mediated by these online networks by and through which spaces of commemoration and narratives of memorial are created" (Carrol & Landry, 2010 342).

What do you think they mean by grounded theory? How would you explain the method? How do you feel about how the method is described here? What could be better?

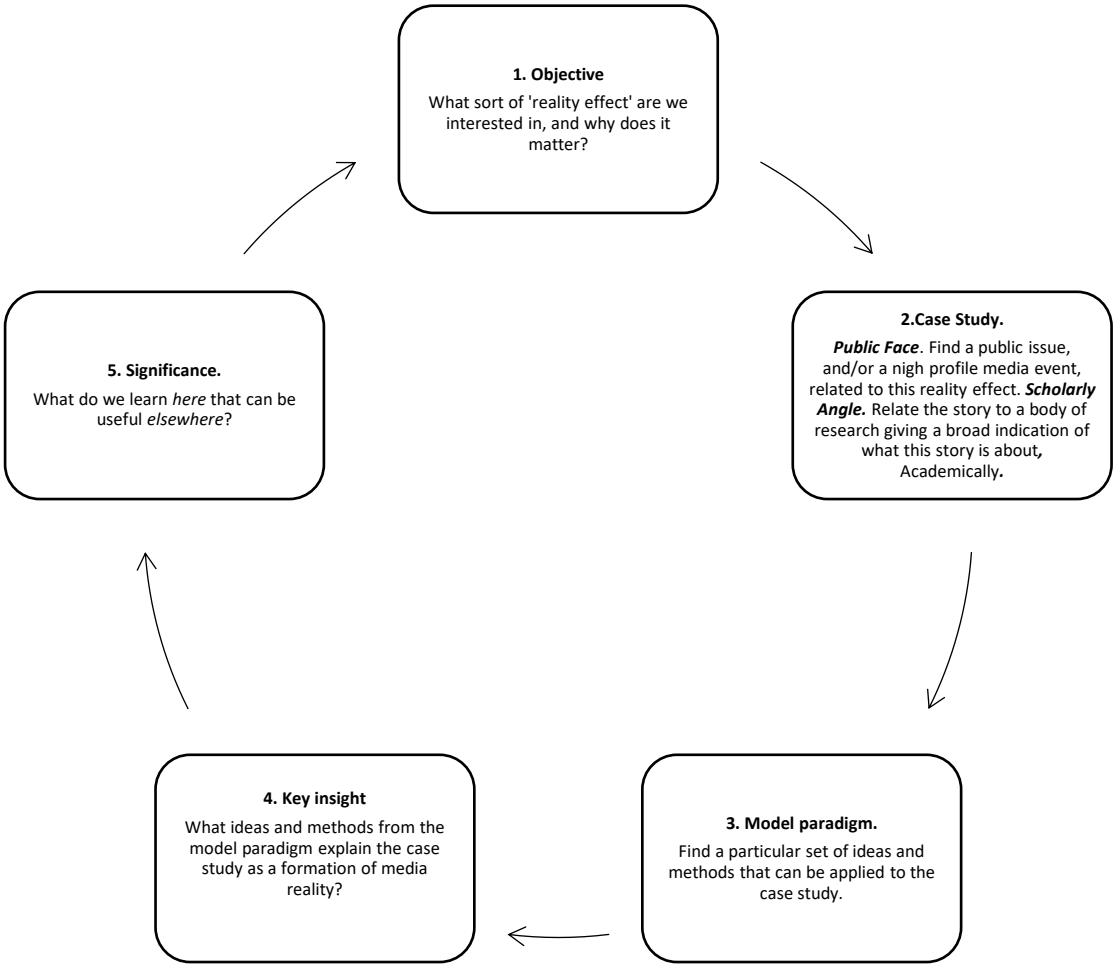
What is a media ritual?

Practicing the concept.

The readings on death and social media make the noteworthy point that sometimes, using media involves us in the celebration, or acknowledgement of social values. In this sense, it provides a method for appreciating how media use operates simultaneously at the micro and macro levels. For example, if you mourn a loved one via social media, you are expressing personal grief, but also in the knowledge that there are unspoken but widely understood rules for doing this that reflect established norms. The lesson is to consider how media based symbolic activity stitches us more or less consciously into historical networks of beliefs. Bearing this in mind, go back to last week's media biographies-what evidence of ritualistic media use can you find?

Week 4: The research project process

It's now time to apply what we've done so far to developing research projects. The diagram below maps a pathway from noticing something interesting in the media world, and developing a research question, that can generate interesting insights on what phenomenon represents, as a representation of media influence.



At this stage of the unit, you should be able to take the first two steps on this journey. So far, we have learned that media make reality in three ways:

- By telling convincing and compelling stories about how the world works.
- With technologies that integrate business, culture and politics.
- By allowing users to get involved in the creations and sharing of reality stories, and emerging patterns of public communication.

So, look at your accounts again, and consider how to turn them into researchable questions.

Suppose you, or one of your peers, has written an account of watching a terror event on TV; or maybe being caught up in such horror. Perhaps you viewed 9/11 as a child. Maybe you followed the hunt for the Boston Bombers live, as authorities famously shut down the city over a weekend. Or the attack on Ariana Grande fans in London. Such crimes are horrific because they are atrocities.

However, there are good reasons to suspect that media *amplify* the shock value and memorability of these events. Media industries, technologies and users process them, live, in particular ways. It's our job to explain how this works and, significantly, to connect our explanations to public concerns.

Today, terror attacks are visible in granular detail, because of two things; global television news, and plentiful user-generated content. In the UK in 2017, police were compelled to warn the public that in the event of a bomb attack or such like, their responsibility was to evacuate the area, not stay and film events. Changing media ecologies seem to have changed our DNA: flight or fight has become flight or film.

We can at least start to map why this may have happened by using the concepts covered over the last three weeks. Terror attacks are familiar and striking media events because they represent all three framing processes; the provision of enthralling stories, provided by the intersection of media technologies, media business and media users.

For this week, then, before coming to class, try to craft a research question. What do you want to research? Search the news; what evidence can you find that your question relates to public concerns? Reflect on the readings done so far; how can you connect your question to one of the reality effects or combination of them? In what areas do you need to do more reading?

Week 5: Ethics and media research

Horner, Jennifer Minifie, Fred D. Research Ethics I: Responsible Conduct of Research (RCR)--Historical and Contemporary Issues Pertaining to Human and Animal Experimentation. Journal of Speech, Language & Hearing Research; Feb2011, Vol. 54 Issue 1, pS303-S329.

Key concept.

Media researchers face the challenge of ethical requirements developed for medicine and social science. Our work involves different 'risks'. Nevertheless, it is incumbent upon us to contemplate the dangers we might pose to others when researching the public impact of the media.

Why does the concept matter?

By now it is clear that our work asks questions that are, ultimately, about public and personal well-being. Media are implicated in issues of security, happiness, inclusiveness-all the things that make life enjoyable. It follows that we don't just do our work because it is interesting, but also because media research performs a public service, and therefore bears social responsibilities.

Whenever we interview someone, or watch them using media, or even gather social media data, we affect their privacy and run the risk of hurting them. Media research frequently explores identities, sexualities, hopes, desires, fear, unpleasant experiences. That requires sensitivity in gathering, storing and reporting data.

There are two tasks this week. First, understanding the historical forces that created the ethical requirements to which we must adhere. Second, considering ubiquitous data can be managed within required ethical standards.

Key Quotes.

"The object of research is to extend human knowledge of the physical, biological, or social world beyond what is already known. But an individual's knowledge properly enters the domain of science only after it is presented to others in such a fashion that they can independently judge its validity" (304).

"Best interests. Best interests is a broad and inclusive principle that relates to animals, humans, investigators, faculty, students, institutions, the cultural environment, the economic milieu, and society at large—both present and future" (307).

Exercise 1:

Explain what these quotes mean, in your own words.

Explain how your research project will extend knowledge in the best interest of stakeholders. Keep working on this exercise, and include it in your next project.

Practicing the concept.

How do issues of harm and vulnerability relate to media research?
Consider the ethical challenges of the following:

- You are in a gym. Television screens surround the walls. Suddenly, news of an international disaster breaks and fills every screen. Some people stop what they are doing to watch events unfold. Others carry on what they are doing. Why is this a valuable example of media power in action? Explain why it would not be
- You are interested in studying online mourning. You have collected some intriguing Facebook posts about the death of public figures. What is 'private' about these publicly visible comments?
- You are interested in popular fiction. You find a website where fans of your favourite show discuss many interesting things; the way it deals with controversial subjects, the way it deals with issues of sexuality and race, that sort of thing. As a fan of the show, you post a few questions to the forum. You use the answers later in an essay. Have you done anything wrong?
- You are doing a small-scale media project. For example, you want to know why celebrity appearances on the TV blockbuster *Game of Thrones* make people angry. Why would

you need ethical permission to ask them? Answer using ideas from the reading. How might such research be harmful?

In groups, pick the scenario that interests you most, and map the risks entailed.

Week 6: Researching media industries: Gender and journalism

Higgins, Michael and Smith, Angela (2011) 'NOT ONE OF U.S.', Journalism Studies, 12: 3, 344-358,

Markham, T. (2012) The uses and functions of ageing celebrity war reporters *Celebrity Studies* 3(2), pp.127-137

Key Concept.

Creativity in media is about the choices people make under given industrial, political, economic and personal circumstances. Media creatives work within fields of professional and historical possibilities, and it is their ability to engage with conditions imaginatively that makes them worth researching.

Why does the concept matter?

Critical media research suffers from the misperception that the knowledge we make is either hostile to media industries, ignorant of how they work, or even both. That's untrue; there's a tradition of work on people in the film, television and news industries. Critical researchers don't see media power as a conspiracy against the public; such plots rarely exist, and assuming they do is a poor way of advocating for more inclusive public culture (Hoggart, 1976). Media content emerges from complicated decision-making processes, where meaning is often circumstantial, not intentional.

Journalism is a useful case study for putting flesh on these ideas. Opinion polls frequently find publics who no longer trust the news. Thanks to Donald Trump, ‘fake news' is a familiar phrase in popular vernacular. Such hype ignores the perils that thousands of journalists endure in pursuit of truth, at a time when good journalism is arguably more important than it has ever been. Consequently, the question of how good reporting emerges from a combination of personal, historical and professional matters has become an exciting topic; partly because it confronts the more simplistic views of objectivity. Understanding this lesson from studies on how journalists do their job enables similar insights on those working in other industries.

Discussion Questions.

- According to Markham, what are the informal markers of the celebrity journalist?
- How have social factors contributed to the development of war journalism?
- “Professional authority and celebrity status depends on the embodiment and performance of field-specific dispositional practices: there’s no such thing as a natural, though we often talk about journalistic instinct as something someone simply has or doesn’t have”

(127). What is Markham suggesting here about the nature of professional journalistic excellence?

- "What emerges instead is a complex relationship between the role of the journalist as witness to the human context of a story, and the expectation that they will negotiate professional obligations of impartiality with a responsibility towards the home nation." (Higgins and Smith, 353). According to this quote, what is the unique role of the individual journalist in the news production process?
- What do the concepts of 'embodiment' and 'witnessing' add to our understanding of the important questions that we should ask of people who work in media industries?
- How would you describe the methods used in both pieces?
- What is the value of focusing on small samples of journalists? How can this be justified?

Practicing the concept.

Case Study: Sexism in Sports Journalism

Find out all you can about Australian Journalist Mel McLoughlin. Start with a Google search. Is it fair to say that sexism has damaged her career? Do you think media and other institutions have done enough to support her? What questions does her career raise about the gendered nature of work in the field of media sport?

Or, do the same exercise with another media figure of your choosing.

Week 7: Media events: Researching place and mobility

Key concept.

That the presence and use of media change physical spaces, by giving them new social meanings, and creating new ways of acting in those spaces (think how Wi-Fi has changed coffee shops).

Why does the concept matter?

Earlier, we heard about the work of Harold Innis and James Carey. Both influential figures shared an interest in how media were involved in the economic management of space. There was a close connection, they believed, between the movement of information and ideas, via various communications technologies, and the arrangement of physical environments. What they meant was that when societies change how they communicate, they also change social and physical relationships between people. Mobile media are an excellent case in point. The meaning, practice and arrangement of transport, for example. Trains, planes and buses aren't just containers taking us from one place to another. They are places to work and play in newly connected ways, and this has real economic effects (how many people use public transport, how do you cater for them, what do they expect, what should they expect, and so on). So, researching how the presence and use of media give new meanings to existing social places is an exciting, accessible research avenue. To exploit this, and to approach media places in a structured way, the readings this week introduce the method of participant observation. Couldry's piece on attending New Jersey's

Sopranos tour is notable for many reasons; it's a highly original approach to an increasingly common phenomenon that places a novel spin on Innis and Carey's ideas. Media tourism-going to the site of fictional productions-has enormous impacts on local economies that are recreated as special places to go (other examples would be the new popularity of Northumberland's Alnwick Castle, which was in *Harry Potter*). Notably, Couldry is also one of the leading developers of ritual theory. Hence his reading connects participant observation to our earlier conceptual content. Babbie's piece gives more structured advice on what to think about when observing people and places in action.

Readings.

> Couldry, Nick (2007) On the set of The Sopranos: 'inside' a fan's construction of nearness In: Gray, Jonathan and Sandvoss, Cornel and Harrington, C. Lee, (eds.) Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World. New York University Press, New York, NY, USA, 139-148. ISBN 9780814731826
>
> Earl Babbie. Ch 10. Qualitative Field Research in *The Practice of Social Research (14th ed)* Belmont, CA Cengage Learning

Key quote.

> "The Sopranos tour then combined three spaces that by themselves are unproblematic: (1) the space of general tourism, (2) the space of media tourism, and (3) the imaginary action-space "within" the fictional narrative that (2) sometimes generates." Couldry 144.

Discussion questions.

- How does Couldry feel about being the the real Bada Bing, and how can we relate this to the conflicts between 'the space of general tourism" and the "imaginary action space.?
- Couldry's discomfort relates to a clash or 'rules'-the 'rules' of being a Sopranos fan clashes with the 'rules' of being a tourist in a place that is 'home' to others.
- Take the ten setting listed by Babbie on p 289. Come up with a media version of each social setting.

Practicing the concept.

Go to one of these settings. A media place is anywhere we can say that media affect how people experience and interact in the space. Examples from the readings include media production sites that are also real places-so we might think of *Sopranos*, *Sex and the City* or *Hobbit* tours. But there are other examples; sporting stadia, live concert venues, public transport, cafes.

- Observe the rules of media spaces-public transport, bars, flat share arrangements-how are the rules made? How do you learn them? If someone breaks them, what happens? How do these rules create a sense of home of discomfort?

- Write down everything you see, paying particular attention to how people behave, and how they behave with media.
- Look at your notes, look for patterns-are lots of people doing the same thing?
- Can you see any media uses that appear unusual?

Week 8: Big Data: How social media raise old concerns about quantitative research.

Key concept.

All research involves interpretation and judgment made by humans for situational reasons-even when it comes to Big Data. In other words, there is no such thing as value-free research. Big data promises us to deliver 'better'-that is more detailed and voluminous information. However, this does not mean that it is value free. In particular, we need to be wary of the extent to which Big Data is applied to narrow institutional questions. The solution is to read all data critically and to think about how we can manage the subjective sides of social research.

Why does the concept matter?

Administrative research, and the limits of quantitative research.

Many students approach topics like audience research with quantitative methods in mind. The best way to find the information we trust about what people think, what they like and what they don't like, it often seems, is by doing a survey that will tell us, in pretty clear terms, exactly how many people think what.

They're in good company. Right at the birth of mass communication research, Harold Lasswell (1971) advocated that quantitative measurements of the key features in media culture (he was speaking especially about propaganda) was the only foundation from which the discipline could progress.

Quantitative methods are certainly sophisticated, powerful ways to find special and cultural patterns. Nowhere has this become more apparent than in the world of Big Data, where our tastes, preferences and media use habits can be tracked and analysed in unequalled detail.

On the other hand, Big Data has also been on the end of spectacular fails of late; pundits largely missed political upsets like Brexit and the Trump Presidency. All of which reminds us that any quantitative research professional will tell you that nothing can measure the social world, because that world is fluid, and any research depends on making qualitative choices about what to look for, how to look for it, and how to present your evidence.

The goal this week is to use social media data to reflect on general challenges in data analysis. Boyd and Crawford suggest that Big Data has created the false impression that it's possible to know everything we need to know about people by their social media habits. Their work is the latest variation of the significant criticisms of quantitative methods in general. First, that they aren't especially good at understanding culture, and second that they tend to work in the interests of powerful interests (for more on the history of this, see Ruddock, 2001). Some fear that Big

Data inevitably favours organisations who can gather and analyse mountains of information; resources beyond the capacity of ordinary citizens (McDonald, Likari and Merivaki 2015).

Prosaically, these issues form the background to formidable challenges. When tasked with doing original research, social media data is an easily accessible resource. But what does it represent? There are methods for gathering this information. The qualitative software package, Nvivo, for example, features a plug-in (NCapture) that allows you to capture Facebook posts and Tweets. But why bother doing this? How do critical writings about the limitations of Big Data inform the choices we make here? And, if we look closely at social media sites, what kind of information do they provide us about how social media influence its users?

Key reading.

danah boyd & Kate Crawford (2012) Critical Questions For Big Data, Information, Communication & Society, 15:5, 662-679, DOI: 10.1080/1369118X.2012.678878

Discussion questions.

"The notion of objectivity has been a central question for the philosophy of science and early debates about the scientific method (Durkheim 1895). Claims to objectivity suggest an adherence to the sphere of objects, to things as they exist in and for themselves. Subjectivity, on the other hand, is viewed with suspicion, coloured as it is with various forms of individual and social conditioning. The scientific method attempts to remove itself from the subjective domain through the application of a dispassionate process whereby hypotheses are proposed and tested, eventually resulting in improvements in knowledge. Nonetheless, claims to objectivity are necessarily made by subjects and are based on subjective observations and choices." (667)

What does this mean? How does it affect your view of research methods? In what ways might subjectivity be a good thing?

Practicing the concept

Go to a fan or community website that you know. Explain how your insider knowledge of this site of fandom is a useful point from which to start your research. How does being an insider of this culture alert you to the questions that you should ask?
Collect some posts and read through them several times. Look for; recurring themes, points of conflict, posts that seem unusual. What can you say about the values and beliefs that bind this community? Do members communicate through any conventions that you can identify?

Week 9: Audiences

Key concept.

When people make sense of media content, they are sometimes also making sense of who they are, and where they belong in history. You can see this process at work if you ask the right people about the right content.

Why does the concept matter?

This reading offers a fascinating account of what it felt like to experience the death of Princess Diana, for British audiences in 1997. Thomas' work exemplifies the worth of small-scale, qualitative audience studies. "Small" studies like this can make big claims, as long as we understand the development of audience theory.

Qualitative audience research began in earnest during television's heyday. In that period, there was much concern about the ideological impact of the small screens that dominated leisure time and public consciousness. Scholars feared that popular drama celebrated sexism, racism and capitalism (e.g. Gerbner et al. 1980). But when researchers started to ask people what they thought about television's content, they found all kinds of surprising, creative, imaginative and even subversive responses. Sometimes, to watch TV was to engage, quite knowingly, with significant political issues (see for example Ang 1985; Fiske 1992).

These works created controversies over media power. Some pointed to audiences' abilities to 'resist' television's meanings as evidence of a vibrant political culture grounded in popular fiction (Fiske 1993). Others thought such resistance meant little in the face of a medium that monopolized public attention so successfully (Gerbner 1998). Of late, these apparently different points of view have become conjoined in the observation that media create political publics (Livingstone 2012). Take #metoo. The hashtag emerged in 2017 to draw attention to the prevalence of sexual assault harassment. The move registered shock at the number of social media users stepping forward. But it also garnered critical responses; Australian scholar Liz Connor writing "Yet #MeToo can't be immune to analysis. It's not just a chorus of hurting incantations. It is a media format in a consumer-oriented economy in which information and personal experience are commodities." (2017 no page). But there was the rub. Connor was only able to make her point about the corporate 20onopolization of protest because of the global audience Twitter had gathered. What mattered most? Her resistance? Or the power of hashtags? It's an open question.

The idea that media power works by making us audiences for certain events, even if we don't choose to be so, seems well suited to the digital age. Mobile media and the like make it impossible to hide, so it seems. It's fascinating to note that this was exactly the situation British audiences faced in 1997, long before smartphones and Twitter.

Thomas looked at stories written by ordinary British people on how they reacted to the Death of Princess Diana Thomas brilliantly makes the point that qualitative audience research is very good at *complicating* our understanding of how media arrange *us*. Thomas explains how the death became a landmark political event not because it made people think anything in particular about Diana, Royalty or Britishness, but that it created emotional engagements with these ideas, even for those who didn't want to think about any of them. These ideas-that media ground history by creative affective connections with political issues-explain the value of looking in detail at qualitative accounts of what people think about media. To do so is to observe history in action.

Discussion questions.

Read Thomas, page 6-7. According to his account of the mass observations archive, what is the value of gathering qualitative accounts of media experiences? How does this complement other sorts of social research?

Practicing the concept.

Pick 2 or 3 students to lead the exercise. Ideally, they should be those who are considering audience research for their project.

1. We are going to explore researching how audiences make meaning from media. To begin, exercise leaders should select a clip from YouTube that they find interesting. Pick something that you think is meaningful, or significant, for a particular reason. For example, you might choose a clip from a reality TV show from your home country that has been especially popular or controversial.
2. Show your clip to the class. Project leaders, keep notes on how your audience responds. Are they paying attention? Are there any visible markers of response (laughter, gasps of surprise, horror, shock, disgust, boredom, people checking their phones, complete lack of interest)?

Week 10: Media content: paratextuality and the cultural life of media content

Key Concept.

Have you ever noticed that you know quite a lot about some films, television shows, musicians or sports stars, even though you've never spent much, in fact, any time watching them in action? Perhaps you know a lot about Kanye West or Kim Kardashian, even though you've never listened to his music or watched *Keeping up with the Kardashians*?
This is because, in mediatized worlds, the content of media titles spills across several genres, and attains meaning through the interactions between these forms. For this reason, when making sense of media content, we need to think not just of 'the text', but how texts come to life through interactive forms of production-including fan activity. Bottom line: we can challenge content analysis as a method because it isn't always clear what or where content is.

Why does the concept matter?

Practically speaking, our research questions frequently come from content; we see, hear or read something that we instinctively feel to be imaginative, insightful, unique, offensive, maybe dangerous, then set about researching what makes this content worthy of attention, as something that does or says something about or in contemporary culture. Video games are a great example. In 2012, Brendan Keogh, an Australian gaming expert, wrote *Killing is Harmless*; an entire book about the gameplay in *Spec Ops: The Line.* A detailed walk-through of the game, Keogh argued, demonstrated how video game violence *could* work as a sophisticated device that forced gamers to consider the morality of violence. What Keogh was trying to say is that close attention to

gaming content reveals all manner of nuances that dismiss the value of homogenizing the violence that stokes academic and public concern.

Keogh's book alerts us to two traditions in scholarly approaches to media violence. On the one hand, the idea that forensic attention to the structure of media messages is essential to media research is as old as the field itself: Harold Lasswell made just the same argument about Great War Propaganda. On the other, the method for establishing detailed knowledge has been incredibly controversial. Keogh's qualitative approach to a single game leaves many unanswered questions. How typical is the violence in *Spec Ops*, and does the innovation in this title matter that much, if it isn't like the carnage that most gamers are playing most of the time?

These are crucial questions reflecting core conundrums in content analysis. What matters most? The specific construction of definite meanings in particular messages, or the images and themes that cross entire media landscapes? In the 1970s, when academics feverishly contemplated television's impact, these questions were similarly explored concerning violence. People like George Gerbner argued that repetitive violence over thousands of shows formed the tv's overall message; it's a scary world out there that needs a steady male hand (Gerbner et al. 1980). Others, such as Horace Newcomb (1978), maintained the meaning of violence, or anything for that matter, could not be abstracted from particular storylines.

Thankfully, because of these conflicts, today we can appreciate the benefits of quantitative and qualitative approaches to making sense of content. Looking back, scholars from both traditions agreed that media content represents the industrialisation of public culture. Today, most scholars would agree that we need to scrutinise how media transmit common messages across many forms, and consider how particular texts tell provocative tales that deserve closer attention. Both positions are fleshed out in the readings, which demonstrate what we learn from taking a quantitative approach to large sets of games, and the purpose of considering particular titles. Neither is 'right', it's just a matter of making sure you fit the question and the method.

The gaming literature points to another complication in content research. As we see in these readings, games develop their meaning and value by drawing on other ideas in the public mind. World War 2 games, for example, capitalise on public memory of the conflict as a fight between good and evil; supported by decades of film and television. Moreover, the literature is also part of the gaming text. When scholars treat games the idea that scholars take games as political art forms, they enhance their prestige. At the very least the growth of gaming journalism has had an impact on how we understand the phenomenon as a complex aesthetic form. These represent significant developments in thought on defining and analyzing content. Today's gaming environment features titles that develop their meanings across many genres; games become movies and the like. Additionally, some media content inspires social conversations that probably affect how we feel about the original.

The next task exercise asks you to use the hit BBC science fiction show *Dr. Who*, to explain how its meaning developments beyond the program itself. *Dr. Who* has garnered a wealth of scholarly attention as an entertainment show that encapsulates the significance of public service television as a social resource. *Dr Who* isn't just a TV show; it is a part of Britain's cultural heritage, and carries a widely acknowledged social responsibility, as a result. So when the BBC announced

that a woman would play the Dr for the first time in 2017, it provoked all manner of public commentary, good and bad. The publicity around the change allows the following exercise. The question is this: how much can you find out about Dr Who without ever watching the show? And what does this tell you about methods for doing content research that doesn't necessarily involve a particular film, game, movie etc.?

Key Readings.

Hitchens, M., Patrickson, B., & Young, S. (2014). Reality and terror: the first- person shooter in current-day settings. *Games and Culture*, *9*(1), 3–29.

Hess, A. (2007). You don't play, you volunteer': Narrative public memory construction in *Medal of Honor: Rising Sun Critical Studies in Media Communication, 24*(4), 339-356. doi:10.1080/07393180701567729

Hong, S.-h. (2015). When life mattered: The politics of the real in video games' reappropriation of history, myth, and ritual. *Games and Culture*, *10*(1), 35-56. doi:10.1177/1555412014557542

Discussion Questions.

- Why does Hess think that video games are politically important? Try and make your case using the following quote:

  "The use of digital interactive media, then, highlights an exceptional location of public memory, whereby the creation of memory via a public artefact is experienced in private spaces. Users are invited to take part in history from their living rooms, replicating the museum from a video game console. New questions of digital memory should be asked: What happens to public memory when it is experienced away from public spaces and in private homes?"

- How do Hitchens et al. explain the role of context in interpreting content?
- Why do they use quantitative content analysis? Do you find this piece more convincing than Hess? Or is it more useful to say that they work well together-that in a sense they are working on complementary, but not identical problems?
- Which of this week's methods do you find the most convincing? Can you make a case for combining them?

Practicing the concept.

How much can you find out about *Dr. Who* without ever watching the show?
Where is the meaning of the show produced?
Where is the value of the show produced?

Some resources for this exercise:

https://theconversation.com/finally-the-first-female-doctor-who-81095
https://theconversation.com/uk/search?utf8=%E2%9C%93&q=Dr+Who
http://www.abc.net.au/tv/programs/whovians/
http://www.dwasonline.co.uk/

Week 10: Researching media policy

Key Concept.

Media policy reflects a pivotal political question; does the world become a better place when we think of society as a market, and of citizens as consumers?

What does the concept matter?

The matter of whether people need protection or should be free to pursue their own interests, is perhaps the core political quandary of the modern era. Scholars indeed believe it's had a significant impact on media policy. In an illustration, this week's reading details UK policy quarrels over treating viewing audiences as consumers and, regulating screens and the like through a user-driven complaints system.

We round the unit off with policy because it's an excellent area to consider the value of media theory and research to public life, as well as an object lesson in the practical difficulties of applying those insights to governance.

For many decades, scholars have warned that commercial media consistently celebrate consumption as a way of life. Eating, drinking, driving, shopping; all these things appear as natural ingredients in 'the good life'. All of this is aided by ever more ingenious methods for promoting consumption; alcohol companies' sponsorship of sporting and music events is a case in point (Brodmerkel and Carah 2015).

Lunt and Livingstone see the accelerated intrusion of commercial messages into public life is a symptom of global policy challenges. The trend toward approaching media audiences as consumers who can regulate for themselves is an instance of the threat. Treating media publics as consumers tips the balance of power in media culture toward industries, they warn.

This week's exercises engage students in the processes of trying to complain about and regulate media content. The tasks draw on what we learned last week about understanding media meanings.

Key reading.

> Lunt, P., & Livingstone, S. (2009). The regulator, the public and the media: Imagining a role for the public in communication regulation. *Intermedia*, *37*(1), 26–29.

Discussion question.

What are the problems of regarding media users as rational consumers? What problems arise when citizen and consumer are treated as synonyms?

Practicing the concept.

Before Class

- Find the regulations on alcohol marketing that apply to your *region. (For example, in Australia, it's this. http://www.abac.org.au/publications/thecode/)*
- Find an alcohol advertisement that you think violates the code. Prepare a complaint, based on your understanding of the regulations.
- In groups, choose the most interesting example. Evaluate the complaint, in a manner that balances public interest and commercial opportunity.

In class exercise: Media violence.

Watch this clip from the Clint Eastwood film *Dirty Harry*:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KqgGihIfq5U

Discussion questions.

- How many acts of violence are in it? Compare notes with a partner.
- Can you make distinctions between different kinds of violence in the clip?
- What else is worth coding here? (Gender, age, ethnicity, who are victims, who are aggressors. Another important point to note is that the advertisement at the start of the clip is part of the text. The advertisement is part of the text. How does YouTube change content?

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Biography

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