

# 5 Questioning the business–humanities divide in media studies: A reformulation of the administrative–critical distinction in stakeholder collaboration

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## Introduction

This chapter proposes to bridge two perspectives on media audiences – a critical perspective represented mostly by scholars in academia and an administrative perspective held by actors working in the media industry – and to showcase how collaboration can be used to overcome diverging knowledge interests between these two perspectives. In media studies, the role, position, and work of the audience – the influence of people reading, listening, and watching media over media’s structural conditions – is perhaps the most contested issue of the field. Are audiences hoodwinked into submission to powerful media effects, or are they active agents of meaning-making, coproducing the social and cultural fabric with their media consumption?

The conceptualisation of audiences in the industry is strongly connected with business models and social functions of media. As advertisement builds on the promise that media have effects on audiences, and as media provide channels by which societal actors distribute their messages, audiences are conceptualised as consumers, as targets of messages, and as objects to be reached and influenced. From the position of critical media studies, audiences are consequently viewed as being commodified by the media industry, and as such, vulnerable in the face of media’s attempts to administer, control, and manipulate their meaning-making and actions (Ang, 1991). The dawn of datafication, where more detailed user data allow for individually tailored messages and advertisement (Turow, 2011), has arguably worsened the position of audiences.

In audience research, there is a marked and widely recognised distinction between industry and academic research (see, for example Sullivan, 2013, Patriarche et al., 2013, or Napoli, 2011). As scholars interested in the media–audience nexus, we are particularly sensitive to the distinction – even

opposition – made between business and the humanities. This distinction is often discussed in our field as one between industry research – characterised by a desire to control and commodify audiences as consumers – and academic research – lifted by a critical approach aimed at the emancipation of audiences as citizens. In media studies, this distinction has come to be known as one between administrative and critical knowledge interests (Lazarsfeld, 1941).

In this chapter, we argue that the separation of these knowledge interests is unproductive. An integration of the two traditions is desirable in order to produce knowledge that takes into account the imperatives of media companies as well as the human needs of the audience (for example, to participate in a mediated environment they can trust and which contributes positively to democracy). We challenge and reformulate the opposition between administrative and critical knowledge interests into a proposal for the joint production of knowledge that acknowledges differences in the business–humanities relation and puts these differences into productive use, rather than framing the relation as adversarial. We outline this integration between administrative and critical knowledge – or between business and humanities – as a stakeholder collaboration that encourages dialogue and a meeting between the two interests. The intention is to foster innovation and more robust knowledge about socially critical topics such as datafication, but more generally about the relation between humans and technology.

Our own academic background is that of audience scholars who find the administrative perspective on audience research incompatible with our own humanistic and critical view of audiences as active agents. The proposition of bridging the critical and administrative perspectives can be seen as controversial in media studies. While we share many of the points made by critical scholars regarding the threats of datafication to human rights and democracy, we are concerned by the implicit protectionist approach embedded in the dominant political economy view of datafication research. By offering a critique of the media, this research simultaneously downplays or ignores the agentic character of the audience while arguing for its protection against the evils of the industry. We find it increasingly challenging to communicate the audience perspective across the divide and, hence, look favourably upon ways to bridge the gap between administrative and critical perspectives in media studies.

The chapter is structured along the following lines. First, we introduce the origin of the distinction between administrative and critical perspectives that has contributed to the compartmentalisation of audience research. Second, we outline the distinction in the context of the datafication of media audiences, and demonstrate the disadvantages that this separation has engendered. Third, we review several theories and models that encourage collaboration and exchange between different knowledge perspectives, underlining some of the limitations we see in these attempts. Finally, we

propose a phenomenological approach (Finlay, 2012) as a way to overcome the critical–administrative divide, and argue that both sides of the divide can potentially gain from better understanding the research done by the “other side”.

Our vision for the collaboration is guided by theories in collaborative knowledge production, such as practical theory (Barge, 2009) or dialogic knowledge production (Tsoukas, 2009), and various concepts used to define the terms of a joint meeting (“joint relevance”, Chimirri, 2015; “bounded rationality”, Simon, 1957; “alignment experts”, Sorenson et al., 2019). Our phenomenological perspective on stakeholder collaboration is relevant to larger concerns about the interaction between technology and society, between automation and human action (Hasse, 2020; Vermeulen et al., 2018), which have heightened with the rapid deployment of technologies in many sectors.

### **The historical separation of critical and administrative research**

In the early days of media research, there was no strong separation between industry and scholarly research. Herta Herzog’s research on radio audiences (1941), entitled “What Do We Really Know About Daytime Serial Listeners?”, is considered pioneering work in both academic and industry circles. Herzog’s career navigated back and forth between academia and industry. Following her contribution at Princeton University, Herzog joined an advertising company, and later went back to European universities to teach about the reception of American soap opera. For Herzog, the need to understand what it means to be a media audience in the modern age was manifold and complex, and not reducible to one interest or perspective.

Working on the same project as Herzog (the Princeton Radio Research Project, 1937–1944), Paul Lazarsfeld and Theodor Adorno – two prominent figures in media research – engaged in a disagreement that marked media studies profoundly. As Lazarsfeld was developing methods to help radio broadcasters attract more listeners, Adorno studied the role of radio and, more broadly, cultural industries, in promoting a false consciousness amongst listeners. In face of their differing interests on how to study media and their audiences, the two scholars eventually parted ways, and the disagreement served as a silent background for Lazarsfeld to establish the distinction between administrative research and critical research (1941).

Interestingly, many other distinctions or dualities have followed from this repartition of work in media studies. The administrative versus critical distinctions point to dualities between empirical and theoretical work, quantitative and qualitative methods, practical and abstract thinking, or applied sciences and pure sciences. Ashcraft and Simonson (2015) outline a similar gap between academic and commercial research running along

gender lines, in which Herta Herzog's work in the same Princeton's project was supposed to draw in resources through conducting "messy" empirical research, while "pure" theorising work was conducted by Lazarsfeld. Importantly, as will be the focus for this chapter, the distinction between administrative and critical increasingly signifies the gap between technological development and human development for those concerned with the impact of recent technologies on societies.

### **The administrative and critical perspectives on datafication**

While the field of media studies has moved on from the disagreements between the two scholars, the advent of big data in the media industry is resurfacing the distinction in a new arena. The quantifiable data about audiences and their behaviour is attractive for industry researchers as the sheer magnitude of the data comes with the promise of understanding (and manipulating) the audiences better than ever. And as more scholars raise alarm regarding the impact of media industries and their reduction of people into computable units, they follow the protectionist logic of the early critical research. Thus, on one side of the divide, there is the "big data" paradigm (Kitchin, 2014a), which draws on the availability of data from the internet and social media and on advances in computation, artificial intelligence, and machine learning for administrative purposes. In the context of media, these purposes mainly translate into business and marketing strategy, notably by commodifying media audiences (Fisher and Mehozay, 2019; Zamith, 2018; Athique, 2018). On the other side, there is a growing literature in academia on "datafication" (Van Dijck, 2014; boyd and Crawford, 2012), research inspired by political economy and pre-occupied with the implications and consequences of data collection, and applications for citizens and democracy, produced under the broad umbrella of "critical data studies" (Iliadis and Russo, 2016).

While administrative and critical research can be considered ideal-types or poles, and many examples of integration or overlap can surely be found, the distinction they bring has become a defining aspect of media studies. At the heart of the distinction between administrative and critical research is the question of whose interests are served by the knowledge produced in the field. Today, the distinction articulates an administrative interest in which knowledge is produced to help media organisations achieve their commercial and institutional goals, and a critical interest whose knowledge serves to protect the interests of audiences.<sup>1</sup>

As datafication research focuses on the political economy of media, we can observe the human perspective disappearing from the critical research. Depicting media audiences and users as vulnerable and passive victims of datafication, the critical research does little to bring up the human perspective of audiences, whose lives are deeply intertwined with media and

platforms. As audience researchers, our interest is to critically assess the role of media for social and political life while remaining attentive to the contributions made by an active and resourceful audience, whose everyday life is culturally and socially linked to media in important ways. Therefore, we are dissatisfied with the current distinction between administrative and critical research and believe it to be inadequate in articulating relations between business and humanities. A phenomenological approach that emphasises a meeting between the lifeworld perspectives of administrative and critical stakeholders can provide a way to re-humanise both critique and business.

### ***Administrative perspectives on big data***

Big data have become a key source of innovation in industry (Kitchin, 2014a). Knowledge produced about the audience draws on the availability of data from the internet and social media and on advances in computation, artificial intelligence, and machine learning for administrative purposes. The optimism animating the industry towards datafication exposes the blind spots that administrative research has developed over almost a century of isolation from critical research. Van Dijck (2014) associates this optimism to an ideology that “betrays a belief in the objectivity of quantification and in the potential of tracking all kinds of human behaviour and sociality through online data” (p. 201). As detailed by Beer (2018), the discourse of marketing materials presents data analytics as speedy, accessible, revealing, panoramic, prophetic, and smart. Others compare data to the new oil<sup>2</sup>, which is telling of the blind spots of administrative research towards the ethics, sustainability, and the well-being of society.

This fixation with data is characteristic of an industry obsessed by control. Audience control, however, is not an aim in itself, but has become an instrument of organisational optimisation for beating the competition and making profit. Knowing the audience helps to target and market media production. But as this idea has developed within the administrative perspective in isolation from the critical perspective, it has translated into a narrow understanding of the audiences.

With more and more data, the gap between data representations of audiences and the actual humans behind these data avatars is widening. Audiences are increasingly seen through the exclusive filter of data (Rouvroy and Stiegler, 2016), which is tracking devices rather than people (Bolin and Andersson Schwarz, 2015). Athique (2018) argues that audiences have become largely fictitious commodities that make the digital economy work, claiming that “we may find ourselves increasingly studying data about audiences, instead of audiences themselves” (pp. 71–72).

The reliance on data and metrics is justified by a need to “stabilize industries struggling to adapt to the rise of digital media” (Arsenault, 2017, p. 9) and cheap and automatic measurements of the audience allow us to see

audiences differently, albeit not more accurately (Fischer and Mehozay, p. 201). In the media sector, this means that labourious, expensive, and comprehensive ways of knowing the audience are replaced by audience analytics and metrics (Tandoc, 2019; Zamith, 2018), which provide a constant inflow of data about every website visitor, application user, or smart TV viewer. Complex understandings of audiences are replaced by simplistic and inaccurate quantification that gets challenged by the critical research based on the intent of control and not so much as it loses the human behind the data.

The empiricism of big data leads media to constantly experiment with their audiences, without being able to foresee the consequences of the choices made. As big data knowledge is for the most developed in commercial contexts on engineering know-how, it is not concerned with its societal implications (Murschetz and Prandner, 2018).

### ***Critical perspectives on big data***

In parallel to these developments, research from the critical perspective exposes the dangers and shortcomings of datafication on citizens and democracy (Zuboff, 2020; Couldry and Meijas, 2019a), and denounces the increased commodification and objectification of media audiences that follows from focusing on the quantified audience and exploitation of user data (Fisher and Mehozay, 2019; Zamith, 2018; Athique, 2018). And yet, these critiques have limited impact on the development and application of data analysis and its commercial applications as they fail to appreciate the knowledge interests driving datafication in the media industry.

Much attention in the critical literature is directed towards the “big five” (Alphabet/Google, Amazon, Microsoft, Apple, and Meta/Facebook). In spite of this critical attention, their commercial applications seem to keep gaining ground in terms of their intrusiveness, pervasiveness, and ubiquity. All the while Google and Facebook amongst others are offering users all-in or all-out options via the consent required for their terms of services, effectively forcing citizens to unwanted data collection in exchange for free media services. The recent firing of two top ethics researchers at Google<sup>3</sup> is the latest example in a series of moves that testify of the gap between administrative and critical interests.

We find the criticism raised towards datafication to be blind towards the *modus operandi* of media. It is clear that this critique is presented in the public interest and is useful in putting pressure on the industry. However, critique has become a “hermeneutics of suspicion” towards the every moves of an evil, cold, and calculative media industry (see Mathieu, 2015). While the industry may well deserve the attention of critical research, the latter could bring more nuances by incorporating the perspective of media actors. For a problem with critique is that it often offers very little guidance on how to implement criticism other than ending the status quo. Solutions

like creation of an alternative, ending the structure from which datafication arose (e.g., capitalism), or expecting individuals to opt out and turn off their devices are just too unrealistic. Rarely are the solutions offering more tactical and strategic interventions to the existing models.

In short, we could say that big data knowledge produced or relied upon by administrative stakeholders is characterised by a high degree of technological innovation and social experimentation, by uncertainties in the nature of the knowledge relied upon (boyd and Crawford, 2012) and by a lack of awareness about the implications and consequences that datafication brings to society and citizens (Couldry and Meijas, 2019a). Many scholars question the ability of big data to accurately reflect and predict cultural practices (Kennedy, Elgesem, and Miguel, 2015). Instead, data mainly performs a stabilising role for a media industry that is growing estranged from the human side of audiences. Conversely, the critical perspective is in need of situated empirical evidence about the ways datafication affects and impacts media audiences, and its hermeneutics of suspicion could benefit in being challenged by the imperatives and logics that govern media production. There is also a need for a critique to find its way into industry practice, instead of remaining in its ivory tower.

### ***A profound and irreconcilable divide?***

Looking back at the gap between the administrative and critical perspectives in audience research, Katz and Katz (2016, p. 8) observed a profound divide:

*The profound differences that divided them were, first of all, epistemological (How do we know what we claim to know?); second, contextual (What elements should enter the investigation?); and third, ideological (Do we need to question the ulterior motives of those who posed these questions to researchers and respondents?).*

To encapsulate the two knowledge interests and their perspectives on datafication, we propose Table 5.1, which draws a contrast between the epistemological, contextual, and ideological divides that characterise current discussions. We use the logics of ideal-types to show the forces of repulsion that shape the compartmentalisation of audience knowledge in the age of datafication. Both sides are pushing the other away, seeking to abolish the other. Critique often calls to replace the principles at the basis of the administrative tradition, while the latter is busy ignoring the critical position, persistently calling into question its relevance for society at large. But we wonder whether the divide is as profound and irreconcilable as Katz and Katz imply, or simply the product of almost a century of institutional disconnection and opposition.

We argue that, not only are both interests needed, but their integration is needed to make better research and more impactful critique (in the context

Table 5.1 Comparison of administrative and critical knowledge interests in media-related datafication research

	<i>Administrative</i>	<i>Critical</i>
<b>Epistemology</b>	Positivist paradigm: data tells the truth about human nature	Critical paradigm: data is amplifying things that are wrong in society
	Methods: quantitative, descriptive statistics, relational analysis, correlations	Methods: qualitative, critical desk research
	Assumptions: behaviouralism, exposure, direct effects	Assumptions: power, social construction, interpretation
<b>Context</b>	Practical, commercial (economic/political)	Academic, societal critique
	Answer to old challenges	Inserted in existing dynamics
	Need to control the audience	Safeguarding audiences from the evils of the global industry
<b>Ideology</b>	Pragmatic – getting the most out of the data that is being collected/logged anyway	Idealistic – rebelling against the global capitalist forces
	Idealistic – serving the society by ensuring that the fourth power reaches more people	Pragmatic – pursuit of academic recognition, and “publish or perish” attitudes

of datafication). Critical knowledge cannot exist on its own, but needs to be made relevant for all actors involved in the realities it criticises. There needs to be a way for critique to be recognised, accepted, and acted upon by actors who may not immediately see the value of it. Similarly, critical scholars also need to consider the complex realities involved by their critique and the impact these make on the processes and practices involved.

### **Stakeholder collaboration: An approach to bridge productive differences**

To fill the gaps left from almost a century of differentiation, distancing, and compartmentalisation, we argue that both groups of stakeholders will benefit from a collaboration that we define in terms of a phenomenological meeting between the two interests. “Phenomenology is an umbrella term encompassing a philosophical movement and a range of research approaches” that emphasise the importance of lived experiences in the functioning of everyday life (Finlay, 2012, p. 173). In communication studies, phenomenology may relate to the experience of otherness, which demands openness and authenticity in one’s meeting with the other. As Craig explains, such meeting requires “that we can and should treat each other as persons (I-Thou) not as things (I-It), and that it is important to acknowledge and respect differences, to learn from others, to seek common



ground, and to avoid polarisation and strategic dishonesty in human relations” (1999, p. 139).

We envision the stakeholder collaboration as a long-term and symmetrical relation between administrative and critical stakeholders regarding the production of knowledge about the datafication of media along principles of joint relevance. Here, we want to emphasise the artificiality of the distinction between administrative and critical stakeholders for the phenomenological meeting, as if the formers were incapable of critique and the latter unwilling to recognise the importance of economic imperatives for their survival. A phenomenological meeting is possible because the administrative knowledge interest can be realised critically and because critique can be done within established social orders. In doing so, the participating stakeholders need to accept, rather than challenge, the validity of the other’s point of view. Accordingly, the relation between media and audience, between administrative and critical, and between business/technology and humans becomes collaborative rather than adversarial. Such a phenomenological approach also acknowledges that both industry representatives as well as critical academics also live lives as active audiences, challenging through their own lived experiences the limitations of one-sided knowledge perspectives.

The benefits of systematically collaborating across both interests for administrative stakeholders could be an increased quality, systematicity, and hermeneutic value of big data analysis, a broader and more valid base of knowledge to inform decision-making, and a decrease of the risks and uncertainties associated with datafied practices that are potentially harmful for audiences. From the outset, the benefits for critical academics are an access to the industry-specific data to open it for scrutinisation, resources and know-how of administrative stakeholders, insights into the operating conditions of media, and hence increased relevance of research questions and findings, as well as opportunities to further the interests of audiences amongst the industry.

### ***Going beyond power relations in stakeholder collaboration***

Stakeholder collaboration is here conceived as the exchange or co-production of knowledge between critical and administrative stakeholders. We use the label stakeholder as a broader umbrella term for a variety of social actors, individuals, research centres, profit, and non-profit organisations. The stakeholders can origin from the different contexts, carrying different perspectives but at the core of this proposition is the idea that none is by definition more relevant than the other and we seek to have a respectful recognition of different knowledge perspectives.

In the literature on stakeholder collaboration in audience research, the gaps between critical and administrative stakeholders have been analysed in terms of access, discursive differences, and power relations between the

interests at play (Bolin and Bjur, 2014). The relation is often framed as something conflictual, inviting to take sides,<sup>4</sup> pitted in terms of whose vision, administrative or critical, should prevail: for example, a future with or without “surveillance capitalism” (Zuboff, 2020). The pressure created by critical research on the industry can be said to be partly successful in relation to, for example, privacy issues, epitomised in the coming of the GDPR framework in 2018. But we wonder to what extent such critique is really changing the administrative knowledge interest, or whether such a pressure leads to satisfying solutions for both media producers and audiences. Cookie declarations are a case in point: required by the new framework, these declarations were designed by the industry to obfuscate users (Draper and Turow, 2019), who have largely ignored their implications. But as it is becoming easier to reject cookies, users do so en masse, and cookies will soon become obsolete and replaced by other tracking devices.<sup>5</sup>

These power relations are important because they relate to a struggle about the societal relevance and value attached to research, and the use of research to inform public policies, technological development, educational programmes, and research funding priorities. Bolin and Bjur (2014), noting the asymmetries of power in stakeholder collaboration between academia and the industry in audience research, highlight the risk that scholars become the “academic token” of administrative decisions (see also Mathieu et al., 2020).

Instead of problematising the issue of power as central in stakeholder collaboration, we wish to foreground the phenomenological meeting between the two interests. In doing so, we do not deny the reality of power dynamics, but we do not make these the conceptual and analytical anchor from which to define our idea of stakeholder collaboration. We argue that a framing of the relation in terms of power alone is unlikely to change the status quo and possibly contribute to maintaining borders in place or even exacerbating the differences between these two knowledge interests. Instead, we wish to change the status quo by suggesting an integration of these conflicting interests along phenomenological lines of analysis, allowing for an equal meeting between these two interests in which both sides of the divide can gain and be improved. In doing so, we do not pretend to be able to erase, displace, or smoothen power relations. It is not our ambition to change these knowledge interests, and as they are maintained, power struggles are likely to endure.

### ***Approaches to stakeholder collaboration***

Attempts to bridge the gaps between critical and administrative knowledge interests already exist. These tend to see the dialectic relation as one between academia and practice, and as such they tend to maintain an asymmetrical relation of power between the two; one in which academia is best positioned to inform practice. In the following, we will briefly review some

selected attempts, but with the aim of learning from them so as to develop a model that allows for a more symmetrical relation and exchange of knowledge between administrative and critical stakeholders.

In a project seeking to bridge the gaps between robot engineers and affected stakeholders, the project group *Responsible Ethical Learning in Robotics* (REELER) suggests the role of *alignment experts* as intermediaries “seeking to align robot makers and affected stakeholders based on empirical knowledge of both” (Sorenson et al., 2019, p. 17). In this suggestion, humanistic researchers are the experts who align the knowledge of robot engineers based on their ethnographic knowledge of users and other stakeholders. This model can be assimilated to the distinction between administrative stakeholders, whose application of big data is often grounded in expertise of data science, and critical stakeholders, who anchor their knowledge in the practices of media audiences. However, as critical stakeholders are not reciprocally being aligned by administrative stakeholders, the REELER model runs the danger of reproducing a power hierarchy in the production of knowledge. REELER’s development of alignment tools and training programmes fostering relational responsibility across administrative and critical stakeholders irrespectively sound promising and fruitful. But to this end, it would be important to acknowledge the fact that robot developers/engineers and other relevant administrators are just as much “end users” and “distantly affected stakeholders” in most arenas of their everyday life – and therefore have a stake in humanistic and critical knowledge.

Another interesting approach is offered by what some scholars term *practical theory* (Barge, 2009). Practical theory seeks to develop theory that is *useful* for and *recognisable* to practitioners. “Practical theory is intended to address the problems, dilemmas, and challenges that social actors face in their everyday life and to generate new possibilities for action” (Barge, 2009, Section Approaches to Practical Theory, paragraph 5). Practical theory promotes a meeting between theory and practice meant to encourage (1) a better mapping of an area of research, (2) heighten reflexivity between theorists and practitioners so that each informs the other, and (3) transformations in the practice as a result of theories that “engage and address the interests of research participants” (Barge, 2009). However, in this distinction of practical theory, the role of the different partners is not always clear and can easily remain asymmetrical – in that theory could become a mere servant to a practice, instead of understanding theory as crucial site for developing practice as well.

Finally, another strand of research that promotes a more symmetrical meeting and development of knowledge – one that is more along the lines we wish to suggest in our phenomenological vision of stakeholder collaboration – is the field of *dialogic knowledge production*. Here, a process of dialogue does not necessarily assume that one kind of knowledge is “better” than the other. Dialogue is seen as the medium by which stakeholders put

to work their “productive difference” in the creation of new knowledge (Tsoukas, 2009). Each group of stakeholders is different from the other, and it is by inquiring into their differences that new knowledge emerges. Reaching out to an other provides a means to create distance towards one’s own taken-for-granted centre, which is necessary for reflexivity and transformation.

This process can be understood with the help of the concept of “bounded rationality”, developed by Herbert Simon (1957) in economics to describe how economic reasoning is subjectively limited. Although Simon defines the concept in terms of cognitive ability and limitation, we can extend its use to understand the bounded rationality of knowledge interests, as systems that limit the perception, identification, and typification of relevant experiences. Each knowledge interest is limiting its range of vision and its ability to incorporate relevant data in the building of its knowledge. As reflexivity – the ability to think about one’s practice – is situated within the limited range of relevant experiences (what Schutz, 1970 calls one’s “stock of knowledge” or “frame of reference”), it is no surprise if our ability to reflect on our practice becomes similarly limited by the range of experiences that we allow ourselves to perceive. And similarly, as our ability to transform practice is based on our ability to reflect on practice, we can begin to appreciate the importance of collaboration as a way to challenge and expand on our own centre of attention.

Through stakeholder collaboration, each knowledge interest is bringing its own subjective understanding which, combined with the other, can enhance its range of vision and action. As such, the goal of stakeholder collaboration is not to change these knowledge interests, but to recognise the limitation in their attempt to understand (and to articulate processes of) datafication. As the knowledge interests are diverging, such collaborations are often fraught with conflict, in that an agreement on how to act together based on differing knowledge requires negotiation of where to head on the basis of these collaboration. Addressing the underlying epistemological and ideological conflicts will give space to determine and uphold the *joint relevance* of a project (Chimirri, 2015). Or as practice psychologist Erik Axel (2011) puts it: “everybody knows something, nobody knows everything, and neither do we know everything relevant together; therefore, it is constantly possible that we disagree” (p. 76). For example, critical research rarely takes into consideration the *modus operandi* of datafied media, which in turn makes it difficult to integrate critique into media practice, thereby circumventing potentially relevant and productive conflict across knowledge interests, logics, and experiences.

### ***Productive differences in stakeholder collaboration***

Tsoukas relates the productivity of accepting and working with the limitation of specific knowledge and knowledge interests to the ability to

produce new experiential “distinctions”, whose creation “is facilitated when knowledge boundaries are crossed” (2009, pp. 941–942). The collaboration is conceptualised as the occasion for stakeholders to “assimilate mutually experienced strangeness” (ibid., p. 949). Such assimilation, according to Tsoukas, occurs through three processes of conceptual transformation made possible by the meeting of productive differences: (1) conceptual combination, (2) conceptual expansion, and (3) conceptual reframing. “Through these three processes of conceptual change, new distinctions are made, which, when intersubjectively accepted, constitute new knowledge” (ibid.).

Conceptual combination provides new knowledge when “a new concept [is] generated by combining two or more existing concepts” (ibid., p. 946). Without wanting to preclude the empirical outcomes of actual stakeholder collaborations, we can understand this form of new knowledge production as a process of combination arising from the productive differences of each stakeholder; that is, a combination of the differences expressed in each column of Table 5.2. In this second table, we suggest different concepts that encapsulate the areas of expertise and blind spots of each stakeholder community’s knowledge, which could be used to combine their productive differences. For the purpose of providing an example, we could imagine a new concept called “contextual evidence” arising from the productive differences of each stakeholder.

Table 5.2 Productive differences in administrative and critical knowledge

	<i>Administrative</i>		<i>Critical</i>
<b>Epistemology</b>	Validity issues	<b>Conceptual transformation</b>	Contextual interpretation
	Overwhelming quantity of data		Relevance and issue driven
	Digital traces and metrics to know the audience		Observation and conversation to know the audience
	Opacity due to copyrights and legal challenges and technical specification of data processing		Transparency
<b>Context</b>	Behavioural measures		Reflexivity of audience
	Actionable correlation		Interpretative in-depth causation via contextualisation
<b>Ideology</b>	Control the audience		Protect the audience

New knowledge can also be produced through the means of conceptual expansion, that is, when a concept is extended beyond its normal use to apply to a new situation (Tsoukas, 2009, p. 947): “New distinctions may arise through analogically mapping a relation (or system of relations) obtaining in the source domain to the target domain and, therefore, drawing inferences about something unknown (target) from something known (source)” (ibid.). Here, we could imagine – again more for the purpose of illustration than for predicting the outcome of an actual collaboration – how the concept of audience agency could be brought into the realm of design engineering or audience metrics to create a new concept: “agentic co-design”.

Finally, new distinctions can also arise through the reframing of existing concepts. “Reframing means reclassifying an object, or at least shifting emphasis from one class membership to another, so that a new view of it emerges” (ibid.). In critical research, different metaphors are invoked in order to provide critique of datafication. The metaphors of “colonisation” (Couldry and Meijas, 2019a) or “data as the new oil” have been used to describe the datafication of society, but they are eminently pejorative in their evocation of violence or pollution. Could these metaphors be reframed in a way that is more recognisable for administrative stakeholders? We could imagine that the substance of the critique needs not change, but its reframing could provide a more relevant opportunity for its appropriation by administrative stakeholders.

While we remain reluctant to preemptively outline what concrete new knowledge could emerge from productive differences, that is, where “joint relevance” (Chimirri, 2015, p. 36) across knowledge interests can empirically emerge and be negotiated, we can offer a few speculative ideas. We imagine that ideological positions from administrative and critical research could meet in the idea of empowering audiences. For instance, the data collected about audiences can be made transparent and fed back to people could inspire a formative learning experience that teaches audiences what data are being collected, and how decisions are made based on it (Mathieu and Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt, 2020). Engaging critical researchers in implementing administrative data collection or decision-making practices supports ethical reflections around the limitations and pitfalls of the data collection, inviting consideration and care for the audiences. At the same time, the more administrative researchers share their concerns related to studying audiences, the more empowering decisions can be made as the media products born from collaboration often play a valuable part in the development of public space.

## **Conclusion**

The suggestions that are spelled out in this chapter aim to answer the volume’s call for innovation in knowledge production. But we wish to go

beyond sporadically funded interdisciplinary research projects, beyond an additive mix of methods, and beyond the argument that collaboration itself is a box to tick on impact checklists. What we suggest goes beyond the meeting of specialised disciplines, towards a more in-depth and long-term solution to a problem that has characterised media studies from its early days. We are not simply advocating more collaboration between opposing stakeholders, but a transformative collaboration that seeks to produce new knowledge about media audiences.

In this chapter, the knowledge divide in studies of datafied media served as a paradigmatic case for discussing gaps between critical and administrative perspectives on the relevance and practice of knowledge creation. There are many signs that this gap is untenable and unproductive for the development of our societies in which data is asked to play a crucial role. We suggested a collaboration between stakeholders answering to these two knowledge interests; a collaboration based on a phenomenological perspective in which the “productive differences” of each interest are seen as fruitful for the development of knowledge on datafication and related technological transformations. The collaboration also entails acknowledging and recognising the sources of intellectual and ideological conflicts within the collaborations and seeking to understand the lived experiences of the other to overcome the adversary positions.

This chapter outlined different ideas for how to think and organise stakeholder collaboration – alignment experts, practice theory, joint relevance, and bounded rationalities – that can be used to guide practitioners interested in engaging into collaboration between business and humanities. We encourage scholars interested in collaboration to consider the transformative potential of collaboration, not only as a way to change the other – be it business, industry, technology, and media – but also a way to challenge our own humanistic understanding.

Scholars interested in engaging into a stakeholder collaboration with the industry, regardless of the sector they operate, can draw on our discussion of the distinction between administrative and critical knowledge interests in a number of ways. Our discussion can be especially useful when the relation between business and academia is understood as adversarial. Here, we invite scholars to consider collaboration along a phenomenological perspective, rather than as something organised along power relations. We believe this requires long-term collaboration in which stakeholders from both camps can learn from one another and develop knowledge jointly. In this process, we recommend to explicitly map differences as well as possibilities for conceptual integration as a way to produce a joint road map for the collaboration. The dialogic model entails to think the stakeholder collaboration purposefully and in the long term, rather than as an organic and punctual process, which in adversarial situations is more likely to be driven by power relations where the “other” is approached with suspicion.

In fact, rethinking the adversarial relation between business and humanities – which we explored as a distinction between administrative and critical knowledge interests – made us realise that critical research is not always adequately representing the human perspective treasured in the humanities. Therefore, we should be wary of defining the humanistic project solely in terms of critical research, but would rather rest it on a collaborative project to understand the other.

## Notes

- 1 Habermas (1968/1972) makes a similar distinction but uses the expressions technical and critical, to which he adds a hermeneutic interest.
- 2 Apparently, an expression invented by Clive Humby, according to The Guardian (<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2013/aug/23/tech-giants-data> accessed on 26 August 2021), but see also Rotella, P. (2012). “Is data the new oil?” *Forbes*, accessed at <https://www.forbes.com/sites/perryrotella/2012/04/02/is-data-the-new-oil/?sh=260609747db3> on 26 August 2021.
- 3 <https://www.theverge.com/2021/4/13/22370158/google-ai-ethics-timnit-gebru-margaret-mitchell-firing-reputation>, accessed 3 June 2021.
- 4 Echoing Martin Barker’s keynote at the TATS COST conference in Ljubljana (2014) entitled “Whose Side Are We On?”
- 5 <https://theconversation.com/googles-scraping-third-party-cookies-but-invasive-targeted-advertising-will-live-on-156530>

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