

Researching Streaming Production Cultures: A Roadmap for Navigating a Secretive Screen Industry

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Abstract

Breaking into the screen industry is difficult, also for researchers. This article responds to recent scholarly debates about the problems of generating empirical data on streaming production cultures. Our proposed roadmap offers strategies to navigate the industry secrecy, barriers to access, and unequal power dynamics that often impede production research. Drawing on combined insights from 52 interviews, we share best practices and dispel myths around accessing screen workers and other industry professionals. We also develop a conceptual framework for understanding the different sites of analysis that influence production and associated sources for researchers. The article especially focuses on our experiences from conducting interviews, but we also provide ideas for collecting and synthesizing other forms of empirical data. The resulting roadmap offers a novel approach to conducting research in a complex and opaque streaming environment.

Keywords

Creative methods, interviews, platform power, production culture, streaming

Introduction

US-based global streamers have become major commissioners and producers of content around the world. As a result, they transform the dynamics of screen production and consequently production research. Crucial breaks from the legacy screen industry include the algorithmic curation of streaming content, limited access to streaming data, global distribution, and a loss of intellectual property (IP) rights and residuals. These significant shifts all contribute to an increasing dependence of screen workers on streaming services as well as an urgent need for research focusing on these very issues. Yet studies analyzing the dynamics of screen labor in a streaming era remain limited. This is partly because such research hinges on accessing information that is generally locked in non-disclosure agreements, in a context where power asymmetries between producers and distributors take new forms.¹

Our methodological intervention is based on combined learnings from two separate studies in the European context.² The studies span 52 interviews in 12 countries,³ as well as ethnographic observations of industry events. In this paper, we draw from and contribute to scholarly discussions around research in an era of streaming, platforms, and algorithms.⁴ While we root our findings in the specific context of the screen industry, elements of our proposed roadmap can also be extended to other areas of cultural production. In particular, we offer strategies for demystifying and overcoming barriers in a secretive streaming environment. We also outline a conceptual framework for understanding the different sites of analysis that influence production and associated sources for researchers. This framework is not exhaustive, but it helps to visualize research approaches and the different insights they might yield.

Our approach is tailored to what we call “streaming production cultures,” defined as the cultural practices and belief systems of screen workers (both above and below the line) in the streaming industry. Although production for global streaming services has been ongoing for over a

decade, streaming production studies is still an emerging field. Conducting this type of research requires a distinct methodological approach: one that considers continuities with the legacy industry as well as the specificities of screen production in a streaming era. We build on Caldwell's (2008) foundational concept of "production cultures" which positions production studies as research that engages directly with "the cultural practices and belief systems of film/video production workers."⁵ That involves theorizing "from the ground up"⁶ and gaining granular insights into the everyday experiences and meaning-making activities of screen workers. These insights would be impossible to generate through top-down approaches such as a political economy angle or other high-level industry analyses.

We use the term "streaming production cultures" to signal that key dynamics of screen production have shifted with the emergence of streaming. This is especially due to the techno-commercial specificities of streaming services. Over the last decade, global streamers like Netflix and Amazon Prime Video have adapted their business operations to the particularities of film and TV production while prioritizing technical innovation, data-driven decision-making, and micro-targeting on the basis of individual customers' tastes and behavior.⁷ Their business models also revolve around attracting and retaining paying subscribers on a global scale. These strategies and practices alter industry power structures in various ways. For instance, research on digital platforms has described the increasing *dependence* of cultural producers on the economic models, governance frameworks, and infrastructures of digital platforms.⁸ This has also been observed in the streaming context, with global streamers exerting increased control over production, distribution, and infrastructures.⁹ These shifting dynamics introduce a need to revisit and update research frameworks for production studies.

Our emphasis is on above-the-line and below-the-line workers, as well as streaming executives. However, we also argue for the need to consider production-adjacent players that shape

streaming productions in other ways (e.g. location managers, marketing firms, and tech companies). In line with a media industry studies approach,¹⁰ our proposed method recognizes the broader context surrounding specific streaming production cultures. Among other things, it involves paying attention to legal and regulatory frameworks, cultural specificities (e.g. local language, history, and culture), technological infrastructures, institutional structures and relationships, funding mechanisms, and patterns of media consumption. Since we position our approach within the field of production studies (a subfield of media industry studies¹¹), we take a particular interest in the beliefs, values, priorities, practices, and rituals of screen workers in this context.¹²

Production Research in a Streaming and Platform Era

The interest in meaning-making activities leads production cultures research to employ a wide array of methods and data sources. As Herbert, Lotz and Punathambekar point out, common methods include interviews and observation of industrial activities.¹³ In a similar vein, Ortner refers to “interface ethnography,” which sees the researcher attending events in which the industry presents itself to the public. Referring to Ortner, Mayer notes how such observations allow researchers to put practitioner interviews “in the context of an ethnographic stance . . . towards a whole production culture.”¹⁴ Our research follows this ethos. Like Caldwell, we see our approach as “synthetic,” because it blends multiple sources and modes of analysis. This strategy allows researchers “to keep these individual research modes “in check” by placing the discourses and results of any one register (textual, ethnographic, interviews, and political economy) in critical tension or dialogue with the others.”¹⁵ As we show in the article, this tension is needed to make sense of the complexities of streaming production cultures.

Existing research on streaming production cultures has already yielded vital insights, both empirically and methodologically. Interviews with creatives in the Arab World brought up

unique examples of cultural disconnects in Arabic Netflix productions, which had to be produced in such a way to travel and be universally accessible.¹⁶ Engaging with Korean producers, Kim describes how Netflix is perceived both as an opportunity for big-budget productions, as well as a threat in terms of its approach to IP rights ownership, potentially reducing Korean producers to “mere subcontractors of global streaming giants.”¹⁷ These examples serve to illustrate the rich information that can only be gained through production studies. They also demonstrate the complex and specific ways streaming services are perceived by screen workers in different markets. Yet the methods used in these distinct projects vary significantly, which is also evident in our own research. For instance, Idiz has engaged with both screen workers and other stakeholders (bureaucrats and regulators) to gain insights into production cultures as well as cultural policy geared towards streaming services, which impacts local industries.¹⁸ Rasmussen carried out both an interface ethnography and interviews. For the interviews, she made use of creative drawing exercises to provide interviewees with an alternative way to demonstrate their creative process.¹⁹ In this article, we integrate such insights from our own studies with methodological reflections from other production studies.

We also draw on research that grapples with algorithmic opacity and platform power.²⁰ Scholars have emphasized how streamers are *not* platform companies, primarily because “they are not directly economically and infrastructurally accessible to third parties.”²¹ Even so, there is much to gain by looking sideways to methodological insights in other areas of cultural production. Netflix and Amazon Prime Video may not be platforms *per se*, but there are significant overlaps between these streamers and platforms like YouTube. In the next section, we outline our creative and replicable roadmap for production research in a streaming era.

Roadmap for Studying Streaming Production Cultures

Site of analysis	Types of players	Types of insights	Data sources	Methodological concerns
Media industries	Streaming executives Local broadcasters Industry organizations	Commissioning practices Industry transformations Business/content strategies Power structures	Interviews Observations Industry events Trade journals	Access to participants, especially executives Power imbalance between researcher and participant “Spokesperson speak”
Legal and regulatory frameworks	Regional and national regulators Policymakers Media authorities	Policy concerns Policy goals Regulatory challenges	Interviews Policy documents Industry events Trade journals	Access to participants “Spokesperson speak” Understanding different roles and local contexts
Production cultures	Screen workers (above and below the line) Production companies Producer organizations	Production practices Contractual terms Editorial notes Streaming lore Creative processes Labor conditions Power asymmetries	Interviews Production documents (e.g. personal notes, series bibles) Workplace observations Industry events Trade journals Behind-the-scenes materials Screen content	Access to participants Participants breaking their NDAs Understanding different roles and local contexts
Production adjacent	Subtitling / localization firms Tech companies Location managers Casting firms Audience research firms Marketing firms	Localization practices Data practices Construction of place Diversity & representation Construction of audiences	Interviews Observations Industry events Trade journals	Access to participants Understanding different roles and local contexts

Table 1. Conceptualizing sites of production research. [*Please note that this table will be developed and accompanied by a detailed explanation in the final article*]

The following sections go into more detail with the potential insights and methodological concerns arising from this approach. We especially focus on our experiences from conducting interviews, but we will also provide ideas for collecting and synthesizing other forms of empirical data.

[The rest of the extended abstract summarizes what will appear in the final article]

Overcoming Barriers to Access: Hunting and Gathering

As Ortner reminds us, “anthropologists have always had access problems; it is part of the very nature of fieldwork.”²² Her article on “studying up” and “studying sideways” in Hollywood exposes the difficulties of gaining access as an outsider, both to interviews with industry insiders and participant observation in “inside” locations. In the streaming context, certain transformations are exacerbating the existing challenges of gaining access outlined by Ortner.²³ In this part of the article, we outline strategies for selecting and recruiting interview participants despite significant barriers to access. This includes the ethical concern of asking participants to share their experience despite signing strict non-disclosure agreements with streamers. Finally, we detail how participant recruitment can inform the analytical process in important ways, including by utilizing spreadsheets as an analytical device.

Doing Interviews: Grappling with the Complexities of Screen Labour

This part of the article covers best practice for interviewing screen workers involved in streaming productions. We cover things like interview prep, questionnaire structure, creative interview approaches (e.g. drawings), building rapport, as well as decoding “industry lore”²⁴ and “streaming lore.”²⁵ This also means navigating different types of interviewees and understanding their roles. For instance, contributions from an executive producer will likely differ from those of a screenwriter or line producer, even if they worked on the same project.

Finally, we cover the ethics of care before, during, and after interviews.²⁶ This is particularly important for interviews that touch on more sensitive and emotional aspects of screen labor.

Reflexive Analysis: Understanding and Embracing One's Position as an Outsider

As Mayer notes, “entry and access to different production worlds seems to depend very much on who we are, the social worlds we inhabit, and the positions in the workplace hierarchy of academia.”²⁷ The final part of our roadmap details how researchers can capture their own experience and position in the field. That involves continuously making a note of one’s subjective reflections on the more ephemeral qualities of production research. By drawing on feminist perspectives,²⁸ we examine the interaction between positionality and knowledge production in this kind of research. We are especially interested in the power asymmetries researchers may encounter. That includes the power dynamics between researchers and participants as well as those felt by the participants in their collaborations with streamers. In addition, we consider how researchers can integrate their subjective reflections with the reflexive thematic analysis²⁹ of empirical data. Finally, we touch on ethical concerns around confidentiality, including the compromises researchers face when using pseudonyms in streaming production research.

¹ Annemarie Navar-Gill, “The Golden Ratio of Algorithms to Artists? Streaming Services and the Platformization of Creativity in American Television Production,” *Social Media + Society* 6, no. 3 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305120940701>; Deborah Castro and Cascajosa Concepción, “From Netflix to Movistar+: How Subscription Video-on-Demand Services Have Transformed Spanish TV Production,” *Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* 59, no. 3 (2020): 154–61, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27063699>; Fadi G. Haddad and Alexander Dhoest, “Netflix Speaks Arabic, Arabs Speak Netflix: How SVOD Is Transforming Arabic Series Screenwriting,” *Journal of Arab & Muslim Media Research* 14, no. 2 (2021): 261–80, https://doi.org/10.1386/jammr_00034_1.

² Daphne R. Idiz, Kristina Irion, Joris Ebbers, and Rens Vliegthart, “European Audiovisual Media Policy in the Age of Global Video on Demand Services: A Case Study of Netflix in the Netherlands,” *Journal of Digital Media & Policy* 12, no 3 (2021): 425–49, https://doi.org/10.1386/jdmp_00070_1; Daphne Rena Idiz, “Local Production for Global Streamers: How Netflix Shapes European Production Cultures,” *International Journal of Communication* 18, no. 2024 (2024): 2129–4, <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/21881>; Nina Vindum Rasmussen, “Data, Camera, Action: Screen Production in a Streaming Era,” PhD diss., King’s College London, 2022, <https://kelpure.kcl.ac.uk/portal/en/studentTheses/data-camera-action>; Nina Vindum Rasmussen, “Friction in the Netflix Machine: How Screen Workers Interact with Streaming Data,” *New Media & Society* (2024), <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448241250029>.

³ Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the UK.

⁴ See, e.g., Tiziano Bonini and Alessandro Gandini, “The Field as a Black Box: Ethnographic Research in the Age of Platforms,” *Social Media + Society* 6, no. 4 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305120984477>; Angèle Christin, “The Ethnographer and the Algorithm: Beyond the Black Box,” *Theory and Society* 49 (2020): 897–918, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11186-020-09411-3>; Nick Seaver, “Algorithms as Culture: Some Tactics for the Ethnography of Algorithmic Systems,” *Big Data & Society* 4, no. 2 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.1177/2053951717738104>; Nick Seaver, *Computing Taste: Algorithms and the Makers of Music Recommendation* (University of Chicago Press, 2022); Vilde Schanke Sundet, “Provocation: Why I Want to Talk Television with Global Platform Representatives,” *Critical Studies in Television* 16, no. 4 (2021): 455–461, <https://doi.org/10.1177/17496020211044918>.

⁵ John Thornton Caldwell, *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television* (Duke University Press, 2008), 1.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Stuart Cunningham and David Craig, *Social Media Entertainment: The New Intersection of Hollywood and Silicon Valley* (NYU Press, 2019), 20–21.

⁸ David B. Nieborg and Thomas Poell, “The Platformization of Cultural Production: Theorizing the Contingent Cultural Commodity,” *New Media & Society* 20, no. 11 (2018): 4275–4292, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818769694>.

⁹ Daphne Rena Idiz and Thomas Poell, “Dependence in the Online Screen Industry,” *Media, Culture and Society* (forthcoming); Petr Szczepanik, “SVOD Production in East-Central Europe: Understanding the ‘Streamer Imaginaries’ of Independent Producers,” in *European Cinema in the Streaming Era*, ed. Christopher Meir and Roderik Smits (Palgrave Macmillan, 2024).

¹⁰ See, e.g., Daniel Herbert, Amanda D. Lotz, and Lee Marshall, “Approaching Media Industries Comparatively: A Case Study of Streaming,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 22, no. 3 (2019): 349–366, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877918813245>; Jennifer Holt and Alisa Perren, “Introduction: Does the World Really Need One More Field of Study?” in *Media Industries: History, Theory, and Method*, ed. Jennifer Holt and Alisa Perren (Wiley-Blackwell, 2009); Jennifer Holt and Alisa Perren, “Media Industries: A Decade in Review,” in *Making Media: Production, Practices, and Professions*, ed. Mark Deuze and Mirjam Prenger (Amsterdam University Press, 2019).

¹¹ Paul McDonald, “Introduction,” *Cinema Journal* 52, no. 3 (2013): 149, <https://doi.org/10.1353/cj.2013.0025>.

¹² Herbert et al., “Approaching Media Industries Comparatively: A Case Study of Streaming,” 49

¹³ Ibid, 65.

¹⁴ Vicki Mayer, “Studying up and F**cking up: Ethnographic Interviewing in Production Studies,” *Cinema Journal* 47, no. 2 (2008): 141–148, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30137709>.

¹⁵ Caldwell, *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television*, 4

¹⁶ Haddad and Dhoest, “Netflix Speaks Arabic, Arabs Speak Netflix: How SVOD Is Transforming Arabic Series Screenwriting.”

¹⁷ Taeyoung Kim, “Cultural Politics of Netflix in Local Contexts: A Case of the Korean Media Industries,” *Media, Culture & Society* 44, no. 8 (2022): 1508–22, <https://doi.org/10.1177/01634437221111917>.

¹⁸ Idiz et al., “European Audiovisual Media Policy in the Age of Global Video on Demand Services: A Case Study of Netflix in the Netherlands”; Idiz, “Local Production for Global Streamers: How Netflix Shapes European Production Cultures”; Kim, “Cultural Politics of Netflix in Local Contexts: A Case of the Korean Media Industries.”

¹⁹ Rasmussen, “Friction in the Netflix Machine: How Screen Workers Interact with Streaming Data.”

²⁰ E.g. Bonini and Gandini, “The Field as a Black Box: Ethnographic Research in the Age of Platforms”; Christin, “The Ethnographer and the Algorithm: Beyond the Black Box”; Seaver, “Algorithms as Culture: Some Tactics for the Ethnography of Algorithmic Systems”; Seaver, *Computing Taste: Algorithms and the Makers of Music Recommendation*.

²¹ Thomas Poell, David Nieborg, and Brooke Erin Duffy, *Platforms and Cultural Production* (Polity Press, 2021), 6.

²² Sherry B. Ortner, “Access: Reflections on Studying up in Hollywood,” *Ethnography* 11, no. 2 (2010): 212, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1466138110362006>.

²³ See also Sundet, “Provocation: Why I Want to Talk Television with Global Platform Representatives.”

²⁴ Timothy Havens, “Towards a Structuration Theory of Media Intermediaries,” in *Making Media Work*, ed. Derek Johnson, Derek Kompare and Avi Santo (NYU Press, 2014).

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- ²⁶ Carla Pascoe Leahy, "The Afterlife of Interviews: Explicit Ethics and Subtle Ethics in Sensitive or Distressing Qualitative Research," *Qualitative Research* 22, no. 5 (2022): 777–794, <https://doi.org/10.1177/14687941211012924>.
- ²⁷ Mayer, "Studying up and F**cking up: Ethnographic Interviewing in Production Studies," 143.
- ²⁸ See, e.g., Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 575–599, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3178066>; Laura L. Ellingson, *Embodiment in Qualitative Research* (Routledge, 2017); Gillian Rose, "Situating Knowledges: Positionality, Reflexivities and Other Tactics," *Progress in Human Geography* 21, no. 3 (1997): 305–320,
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