# Routledge Companion to Audiences and the Performing Arts

# Chapter 24

# Ethics in audience research

## By the book or on the hop?

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# ETHICS IN AUDIENCE RESEARCH

## By the book or on the hop?

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Several disciplines occupy the flourishing domain of audience research, bringing their own methodological preferences for human research, such as psychology, marketing, sociology, anthropology, cultural studies and health. As a result, audience research is more ethically complex than its forebear, reception studies, with its relatively safe discursive extrapolation from the text. As audience research matures as a field, ethical questions emerge: what are the major ethical challenges involved in collecting, analysing and publishing research based on audiences' experiences? Where are the weaknesses in how audience research is currently conducted and used? What can new researchers stepping into audience research learn about potential hotspots from their more experienced colleagues?

Over the same period in which audience research has flourished, the institutional structures that inform and circumscribe human research have also proliferated. Universities have responded to historical ethics scandals by adopting more directive regulations. Consequently, the way we think of ethics in relation to human research has changed. Thirty years ago, a researcher's approach to a project's ethics was informed by their colleagues and shaped by the normative practices of their discipline. Today, the same researcher's project is shaped by an environment of compliance and it follows a set of standardised trans-disciplinary principles applied through a research committee rather than being guided chiefly by discipline-specific practice. Whereas 30 years ago, the researcher was wholly responsible for the ethical conduct of that research, today responsibility and accountability are held by the institution. The researcher's approach is necessarily determined by the reputational concerns of the research unit and institution rather than the researcher and their discipline (O'Neill 2013, 718).

A symptom of this bureaucratic oversight is that ethics is chiefly seen in relation to the way we treat research participants. Other conduct, such as that related to research conception, design and dissemination, is not addressed except as it relates to the treatment of animal and human subjects. But such a restriction is inadequate for current research conditions. A contrast between two grand research scandals from two different eras – the Milgram experiment of the 1960s and Cambridge Analytica in 2018 – illustrates how the preoccupation with research participants in our framework of ethics needs to be rethought. In Stanley Milgram's infamous psychology experiment, research subjects (a term chosen in preference to 'participants' by the fact that they were not enabled to contribute to the design or conduct of the research) were required to exert electric shocks to their fellow subjects. The aim was

to allow researchers to draw conclusions about how an individual's obedience to authority might trump their personal conscience. There was subsequent controversy over how the research team treated its subjects – both the subjects giving the shocks and those receiving them – and the cost of their involvement on their subsequent wellbeing.

Contrast this historical example with the Cambridge Analytica (CA) scandal of 2018, in which CA acquired Facebook user data through a third-party app without the users' knowledge or consent. Its analysis of this data informed covert advertising for Donald Trump's 2016 election campaign, contributing to his victory. This action involved no immediate physical or psychological harm to research 'participants.' Indeed, they were unaware that CA was using their data until the scandal broke in the media. True, like the Milgram experiment, CA collected human information in an unethical if not illegal manner because the Facebook users did not give their consent to this use. But the bigger scandal related to how that data was used to manipulate the outcome of a democratic process. In this case, questions about the ethics of data collection were obviously part of a greater question about how and by whom data was misused. A secondary ethical issue related to the power of CA's research, because the scale of its data collection (an estimated 50 million Facebook users) was significantly larger and richer than any that earlier researchers could access.

This chapter gives voice to the reflections of researchers about the full scope of important and common ethical considerations in audience research. Using ten interviews with researchers across four countries (the UK, USA, Australia and Finland), the interviewees represent different disciplines, practise different data collection methods, and are at different career stages (from a PhD student to a career-long researcher now retired from university employment). In many cases, the interviewees do not describe themselves as audience researchers, but as researchers who have incorporated research on audiences into a broader agenda. Several of the interviewees appear in the current *Companion*, reflecting this publication's role in bringing together experienced researchers of audiences.

The chapter adopts Brinkmann and Kvale's distinction between micro- and macro-ethics. A major limitation of formal ethics processes is that they tend to focus on 'micro-ethics' or how to treat research participants (Brinkmann and Kvale 2005, 166). But there are also 'macro-ethics' related to how the research is commissioned, designed and disseminated. Research can be 'ethically unproblematic on a micro level, that is, where participants are treated with respect and confidentiality, but which is nevertheless ethically problematic on a macro level' (Brinkmann and Kvale 2005, 167). Following a brief overview of the historical development of institutional ethics processes, the chapter discusses both 'micro-' and 'macro-ethics' issues in audience research. It argues that the issues researchers experience are more complex than ethics protocols currently acknowledge, and that major ethical challenges lie in the design, analysis and dissemination practices, and power relations between commissioning agencies or sector-based partners and researchers, as much as with the involvement of research participants. The researchers also follow and extend Brinkmann and Kvale's description: 'Being ethical means being open to other people, acting for the sake of their good, trying to see others as they are, rather than imposing one's own ideas and biases on them' (2005, 161). However, as part three of this chapter demonstrates, being ethical also requires being aware of the influence of other stakeholders' ideas and biases.

## A brief overview of institutional ethics regulations

Ethics regulations by government or research institutions focus on human subjects, because they were established to respond to infringements on the rights of subjects in biomedical

research, as represented by the 1948 Nuremberg Code. Gradually, ethics committees – more common in a western research tradition – came under increasing centralised oversight. From the 1970s to the 2000s, the USA, India, Canada, the UK and Australia all established ethics acts, codes and/or authorities, firstly to guide and oversee scientific experiments on humans, and later animals, and then to oversee social sciences that involve human subjects. These processes were established to protect the physical and mental wellbeing of participants by vetting researchers' proposed data collection techniques. They are also occupied with protecting participants' privacy and ensuring that consent to participate is given willingly and in full knowledge of the implications of participation. Reflecting their origins in overseeing medical experiments, in most countries ethics regulations apply to university or research institute-based research, and do not apply to other professions that conduct market or social science research, such as the media and consultancies (Haggerty 2004). Yet the growing reliance on research by global companies such as Netflix and Amazon suggests that university research is not the only, nor indeed the most problematic, site for research ethics.

For the regulated research sector, the need to demonstrate compliance with the institutionally determined principles of ethical conduct has become more demanding, so that researchers are encouraged to see these principles as both the *framework for* and the *evidence of* their ethical behaviour. Institutionally determined ethics regulations have resulted in a 'paradigmatic reduction of research ethics to the domains of informed consent, privacy, and confidentiality' through tangible measures, such as forms and procedures (Cascio and Racine 2018, 170). It is therefore tempting to conflate ethical conduct with success in achieving and complying with approval from an ethics committee. In reality, this compliance is at best a small part of, and at worst inimical to, a guarantee of ethical behaviour for audience researchers. Allen and Israel (2018) note that the regulatory requirements and practices of human research have produced

> 'a comprehensive rule book' which can generate 'an adversarial climate of resentment, avoidance and misrepresentation, encouraging researchers to outsource their responsibility for the ethical design of a project to the review body … [and] distorting research agendas toward approaches that are more likely to receive ethics clearance.'
>
> *(Allen and Israel 2018, 2)*

Ben Walmsley reflected on this impetus:

> There's a bit of you that as a researcher wants things to sail through the ethics committees, so there's that bit that keeps things simple. And then there's the bit of you that wants to be pioneering and explore things that are difficult and challenging.
>
> *(Walmsley Interview 2019)*

The origin of audience research was itself a movement motivated by an ethical sensibility. In academic circles, empirical audience studies emerged from concern about the absence of audience voices from reception studies scholarship of the 1980s and 1990s. In 1999, Ann Gray wrote that when media scholars felt obliged to address the topic of audiences, they tended to do so 'either by producing overviews of "the field" or by taking theoretical positions on the conceptualisation of the audience – some notably managing to theoretically evacuate any study of actual audiences' (1999, 25). In contrast, the emergence of empirical audience research was 'motivated by a desire to allow participants to have some say in the research agenda' (Gray 1999, 32). Helen Freshwater observed that theatre research appeared 'more comfortable making strong assertions about theatre's unique influence and impact

upon audiences than gathering and assessing the evidence which might support these claims' (2009, 3–4). The drive to define a field of audience research was in part an ethical decision aimed at redressing the exclusion of audience voices, and also part of a larger turn in the social sciences towards ethnographic research. The ethical issues that then arose from audiences' inclusion are discussed in the next section.

## 'Micro-ethics': ethical challenges in working with research participants

Interviewees for this chapter identified that protecting the rights of research participants is more complicated than ethics procedures allow for. The interviews identified six areas of ethical concern with existing ethical protocols for working with audiences or arts participants:

### *Ethics protocols are often western, colonialist or normative*

> There are different sorts of people who haven't been researched before [and] of course that brings added complication.
>
> *(Walmsley Interview 2019)*

A major argument for researcher agency over ethics protocols is that such protocols are often based on normative approaches that are insensitive to the diversity amongst audiences, and what such diversity demands (see Conner in this collection). Specific ethical concerns are often raised about work with audiences who represent under-represented or marginalised communities, including people who are Indigenous, young, from culturally marginal backgrounds, or have disabilities. That ethical concerns are raised by researchers engaging with marginalised audiences is not surprising since, as Israel has pointed out, research ethics are largely 'produced and conducted in the global North; are based on universalist claims about ethics and the primacy of the individual; exclude other belief systems; and erase colonial and neo-colonial experiences' (Israel 2015, 46). The impossibility of erasing colonial experiences was exemplified by Kim Dunphy, who conducted research in Timor-Leste (Dunphy Interview 2019). As part of the proscribed and standardised University ethics procedure, Dunphy was required to offer her research participants the telephone number of a counsellor so they had someone to speak to if they felt distressed by the interview. She considered this

> quite an irony in Timor-Leste where people have been subject to the most terrible forms of colonisation [and] violence … over 500 years, [yet] I've got to offer them counselling for a one-hour interview about their child being involved in a play.
>
> *(Dunphy Interview 2019)*

Not only was the researcher unable to provide access to the promised counselling service as there was none available, but she found it challenging to have to follow a standardised ethics arrangement when most of the people she interviewed did not have access to a telephone.

Another example is Martin Barker's research into people's online uses of pornography (Barker Interview 2019). When the ethics committee proscribed the part of his survey that included under 18-year-olds, the research team ignored that requirement:

> The reason it's important is because those are the voices that are not heard in the public sphere. They were presumed to be incapable of speaking for themselves. So we put it

in. It generated … enough [responses] to enable us to make a contribution to ongoing debate about the changes in the sexual mores of the young.

*(Barker Interview 2019)*

For this reason, Barker felt that 'it was the right thing to do. And the fact that we kind of slipped it in under the nose of the ethics committee – I'm not at all embarrassed by that' (Barker Interview 2019). Barker's dispute with his ethics committee's requirement rests on the committee's assumption that the possible vulnerability of a youth cohort outweighs the value of its contribution to the study.

In contrast, other projects that appear to easily receive ethics committee permission may well cause offence. Mark Taylor highlighted work that included a survey approved by the ethics committee, but which reinforced a gender binary: 'Some of the questions were implicitly transphobic. The person who was answering these questions found them a bit distressing, flagged it to the organisation, and the organisation didn't handle it very well' (Taylor Interview 2019). Surveys are also often used to identify the cultural or ethnic origins of respondents. While in the UK, the category of BAME (black, Asian and minority ethnic) is a common feature of surveys used by social statisticians, 'it's not a term that people generally like, particularly … the people who might be described as BAME.' Causing such offence can also cause respondents to reject the survey, undermining the value of the research. 'They'll think, "This organisation is naïve, they don't know what they're doing. They clearly don't understand what it is like to be a person of colour"' (Taylor Interview 2019).

### Research participants are at risk of exploitation

I think just generally, people don't want to take the time to fill out a survey, you know. Except in situations where they're either really pissed about something, or outrageously happy.

*(Brown Interview 2019)*

From the field of medical research, Rhodes identifies the importance of all parties seeing the value of research: 'When physicians and patients acknowledge and accept that treatment in the context of research offers our best hope for advancing the field we will be significantly more likely to improve medical knowledge' (Rhodes 2005, 16). Researchers interviewed for this chapter expressed concern about the phenomenon of over-surveying audiences, who are often targeted for different research purposes, and its impact on the public's willingness to act as research participants. This has an ethical dimension in the sense that audiences are likely to feel exploited by researchers when they cannot perceive any benefit to themselves. Over-surveying also suggests that people are often asked about trivial matters. Reflecting on her experience as a surveyed audience member rather than a researcher, Kirsty Sedgman said:

I always [respond to] surveys and I go to a lot of shows. They always ask me about things like the beverage service. And how did I hear about the [show]? "Was it a good price?" [These] are not the critical issues they should be asking. They should be asking [about] the meaning I got from [the experience]? How was my life enriched? They are the big questions.

*(Sedgman Interview 2019)*

This is a question of ensuring that research is in fact necessary and in the public interest, but also of how to engage audiences in research to avoid frustration or fatigue with being involved.

Researchers who are sensitive to these risks work to frame participation as a two-way exchange with potential benefits, or at least some degree of reciprocity. Benefits might include giving audiences access to research results, or providing co-creation opportunities. Matthew Reason is committed to involving the subjects in research design, analysis or dissemination:

> I want to work with people [who are] self-reflective and self-aware so that I engage them with the kind of questions I'm asking... to work in a manner that has that participatory quality. The people involved in research should get something out of it as well as the researcher … that could simply be fun [or] pleasurable.
>
> *(Reason Interview 2019)*

Martin Barker noted that, even with a research tool as static as a survey, greater buy-in from respondents occurs when people are interested in the questions they are asked:

> One of the problems is customer feedback questionnaires, which are endless, turgid and clearly designed to make you say, "I loved everything about this experience. I will shop with you again." And it's our skill at designing questionnaires to make them interesting enough and to have pitched them in a way that people think, "Okay, this is worth doing because people are genuinely interested in our answers."
>
> *(Barker Interview 2019)*

## Consent is not always clear, and confidentiality is not always preferred

The concept of consent is problematic. In societies with a culture of government or business surveillance, people who are willing to be interviewed may become much less so when asked to give written consent, out of fear over whose hands that consent form might end up in and the purposes to which it might be used. In other cases, where formal consent is given, it is often not clear to the interviewee that they are doing so, particularly when data is collected digitally. This can arise partly from the fact that respondents do not always read the descriptor that accompanies a consent request but also can apply where the terms and conditions of sale, for example, are complex and how data is used is only one of many topics:

> if you are buying tickets through a venue website, and you tick a box saying that you consent to the venue terms and conditions, most people won't realise that one of the things that this might imply is that your transaction ends up being used for analysis.
>
> *(Taylor Interview 2019)*

In discussing a project with a local government organisation providing free Wi-Fi to people at a festival, Kim Dunphy noted: '[People] were using the council's free Wi-Fi and then audience research questions popped up on their phone' (Dunphy Interview 2019). This technique for gathering data was seen by the commercial company employed by the organisers of the event as a quick and cost-effective way to get responses from a relatively large number of people. Dunphy felt that this was 'kind of double dipping. The people had agreed to use the free Wi-Fi, but they didn't know that they were also going to be given these questions' (Dunphy Interview 2019). She added:

> Whereas you know when you get onto the airport Wi-Fi, they're going to send you stuff [they want to] sell. But when it's local government and you get that too, there's a possibility of people feeling that engaging in audience research [has come about] insidiously.
>
> *(Dunphy Interview 2019)*

These are issues that affect commercial research – conducted by marketing companies – arguably more than university-based research institutions.

In relation to qualitative research, Kirsty Sedgman rejected a blanket expectation of confidentiality and argued instead for the ethics of acknowledgement:

> I'm starting from the position that people may very well want their voices to be heard and want their name to be recognised in relation to things that they say … If I'm quoting, say, Lyn Gardner [from] *The Guardian*, then I would obviously use her name and attribute the things that she says properly. … Why would I offer [ordinary audience members] any less dignity than someone like Lyn Gardner?
>
> *(Sedgman Interview 2019)*

The idea that confidentiality is inevitably a condition that participants want or expect might therefore be constantly challenged as part of the reflective thinking required for research.

Sedgman also raised the issue of 'contextual integrity' in relation to consent. This applies when considering using data that is already in the public domain. Sedgman notes that:

> contextual integrity obviously suggests this is not as simple as that. Just because something's out in the public domain doesn't necessarily mean that someone is posting it with the expectation or approval that a researcher might later take it away and quote it, out of context … where they don't have the opportunity to go back and delete it.
>
> *(Sedgman Interview 2019)*

### Power relations between researcher and subject

> Since I read all your interview questions, I kept making notes going, 'No, this is a political issue as much as an ethical issue,' if your research has any kind of socially progressive aspect to it. And I think… In what way shouldn't audience researchers have socially progressive ethics towards their research? Then it becomes a question of politics.
>
> *(Hadley Interview 2019)*

How audience research is conducted can also reinforce class and race-based power relations and differences. This differential was clear to Kim Dunphy when she interviewed a Timorese woman from an impoverished community:

> A community musician came to this little town to do some music and I was interviewing a mother about her son's experience as a participant in this programme. And she said, "Yes, this programme's very nice, but my children are hungry." That moment… was just very distressing for both of us. She was telling me as a white person who obviously had resources that were not being addressed by [the] music programme.
>
> *(Dunphy Interview 2019)*

The researcher's whiteness and privilege shaped how she and the participant related to each other, sidelining the topic of enquiry.

The power relations between subject and researcher are highlighted in the context of ethnographic audience research. Katherine Irwin describes unethical ethnographic research as 'gratuitous investigation' and argues that the key factor in preventing unethical research is for the researcher to be able to answer the question: 'How were the lives [of informants] affected during the course of and because of the research?' (2006, 171). Brinkmann and Kvale suggest that a contemporary preference for qualitative over quantitative methods in the social sciences might in fact represent a significant ethical challenge, through its 'relations to newer, subjectifying forms of power that work by "governing the soul."' They ask: 'Have the hard, objectifying, but transparent, forms of power exertion in industrial society been replaced by soft, subjectifying and opaque forms of power in consumer society?' (2005, 163). Walmsley noted the particular issues that emerge where the research process is immersive, intensive and involves spending a lot of time together:

> What transpired … was a kind of attachment really between participants and researchers which naively we hadn't really anticipated. And so as wonderful as these anthropological methods can be, they do come with quite significant ethical implications about attachment and detachment.
>
> *(Walmsley Interview 2019)*

He described a particular problem in relation to a 'lone female researcher in one case finding herself quite late at night in a one-to-one situation with a very vulnerable participant' (Walmsley Interview 2019). The ethical issues here involve the protection of both researcher and participant in a clash of needs: the researcher looking for data and the subject looking for social connection (see Chapter 22, Pitts and Price in this collection). The researchers here are at risk of 'doing rapport' or 'faking friendship' (Brinkmann and Kvale 2005), which can be seen as genuine friendship for the participant. Aside from the possible personal danger for the 'lone female researcher at night,' the ethics of ethnographic research are bound up with the researcher's understanding of the ideological environment and personal context within which such intimate enquiry sits.

## *Acknowledging inaccessible audiences*

> As a historian I always start by saying, 'What is missing from my data?... What is the nature of this archive? Who created it? How did they create it? What's missing from it? Why is the material missing? And how might that missing information, that data, reshape the narrative that I'm telling?
>
> *(Conner Interview 2019)*

Where access to audiences is limited, such as in historical enquiry, researchers need to be particularly aware of absent voices and experiences. Our collective knowledge and understanding of historical audiences largely

> comes through just a few gatekeepers, and the limited perspective of often one person, so a critic or a society reporter talking about the gathering of people at a particular event, or the perspective of an audience member who almost always has some kind of privilege working in their favour.
>
> *(Conner Interview 2019)*

Lynne Conner addressed this by being 'openly forthright in my writing about what … might help to reshape the narrative were I to have that information which I don't have and I've never going to have.' An example of significant and troubling absence in the historical field is that the 'whole notion of the African American audience has been a complete mystery. And where there was data, [it] is limited, and coming from a skewed perspective (Conner Interview 2019). This theme is further elaborated in Conner's chapter in this collection. Once again, though, this requires reflexiveness on the part of researchers to ensure that such absences are acknowledged. There are also direct corollaries in research on present-day audiences. Tyldum notes that across the social sciences refusal to take part in surveys is more widespread among population groups with low human and social capital (so for example, 'populations with low education, low cognitive skills, bad health, low income, low social participation') (2012, 201). Dunphy, who conducts qualitative research with marginalised communities, suggested also that

> people became upset by the memories that [the performance] stirred up … and if you're working with more vulnerable people … you may be more likely to stir up those responses. People who don't go to the theatre often – maybe they're more likely to engage at a heightened level when they do engage.
>
> *(Dunphy Interview 2019)*

## Research participation can make for 'positive' ethics as much as 'negative' ethics

While ethics processes are designed to protect research participants in order to achieve a kind of neutral impact, they ignore the fact that participating in research can also have positive benefits. Even in research design that involves research subjects as participants, this is far from inevitable. Participatory research can mean 'a whole spectrum of staging posts, from … an idealised [notion of] citizen control through to more tokenistic approach' (Reason Interview 2019). Reason described the challenge of working out 'how to travel along that line without being tokenistic.' The key challenge identified here is how to empower participants – a methodological approach you might take 'in part for ethical reasons. And partly … because you think [it] can produce interesting and rich data' (Reason Interview 2019). Conner advocates 'audience-centred conversations around their experiences with the arts.' This process of listening to 'non-expert' voices represents a shift in audience research where 'the academic world of audience research in the past … were the proxy for the audience … without any thought that that was problematic.' Audience-centred conversations are based on the premise that 'people want to be able to interpret. They want to be able to say what something means' (Conner Interview 2019). Ben Walmsley noted that 'some of that research coming into town has all sorts of added value alongside a festival' for audiences who choose to be involved (Walmsley Interview 2019).

These ideas that audiences might enjoy or benefit from their participation contributes significantly to our thinking about the dimensions of ethics in human research. As mentioned earlier, the assumption that qualitative research is invariably an ethical good belies the possibility that it may cause harm, but – as Pitts and Price's chapter in this Companion has shown – there are also occasions in which audience members relish the opportunity that participating in an interview or focus group provides as a forum for them to express and thereby deepen their response to an arts engagement, to empower them to contribute to arts production, and provide an opportunity to interact with other audience members.

## 'Macro-ethics': the commission, design and dissemination of research with audiences

The many ethical issues raised above demonstrate the need to think carefully about working with research participants. What follows is a discussion of a number of macro-ethical concerns including how research is commissioned, through what networks, and how it is designed and disseminated.

### *Commissioning and partnering on research have ethical implications*

The ethical risks associated with the commissioning of research relate to how pressure or influence may be applied to the researcher in the conduct of the work. Due to the increasing value placed upon understanding audience behaviour by funding bodies, and the increasing corporatisation of the universities sector to promote research as a saleable commodity, the lines between scholarship and external research now blur. This presents ethical challenges as university researchers are called on and required to produce 'industry-relevant' research. In some cases, the results are intellectual and create collaborations between industry partners and university researchers: research questions are identified in consultation, the industry partner gives data to the researcher for analysis, and the research outcomes may be written or published together. In other cases industry partners simply commission research. In the case of the latter model, underlying ethical issues relate to whether the research produced can be genuinely independent of the interests of the commissioning agencies, as those agencies (arts organisations or funding bodies) are more likely to seek to influence the research in order to protect their own reputation. Steven Hadley described approaching senior staff from a major national institution (UK) for a project on cultural democracy:

> They said, Well, that's obviously a really threatening concept for us as an institution. We recognise it's on the agenda but we find it really problematic. The thing we need to know is where you stand on that, so that we can understand what your agenda will be with the research.
>
> *(Hadley Interview 2019)*

Regardless of whether the commissioning agency has selected a research team on the basis of its 'agenda,' or whether the agency seeks to influence the research findings, the public perception of this arrangement is problematic: 'If I'm working with data from an organisation that are also paying me, you might think, "Well, he's probably not going to write about how the data quality isn't very good, or how … this organisation shouldn't exist"' (Taylor Interview 2019).

These apparent biases in commissioned research are compounded by a competitive context. There is competition, for example, between arts organisations for audiences. In the interests of expediency, research may be commissioned by a central agency on behalf of several arts organisations or by a collective of organisations themselves. These organisations may see themselves in competition and seek to influence the research findings in favour of their own interest in relation to one another. Walmsley, for example, described issues around power in a project that involved numerous theatre companies of various sizes, in terms of 'whose voices shout the loudest' (Walmsley Interview 2019). The research environment too is competitive, and having access to data has professional value that can give researchers an advantage. So even when researchers are given access to data rather than payment, they may be biased towards the organisation that provided it (Taylor Interview 2019).

Of course, the opposite is also true. Research commissioned from independent research-ers is valuable to commissioning agencies precisely because it is independent and therefore seen as more likely to be objective. Martin Barker reported the benefits of this in relation to his work with the British Board of Film Classification:

> Our contract with our group participants was that we would never delete critical views of the BBFC. We found that people were keen to take part in it because they wanted to challenge what they understood to be the mistakes or bad judgment the BBFC had made in censoring a number of films. … I was trusted in that I was unlikely to produce simply what you might call "go-to" knowledge for the BBFC.
>
> *(Barker Interview 2019)*

But to protect this perception, research funding contracts, universities and the research-ers themselves all need to acknowledge the risk that commissioning presents to research integrity.

There is also a tendency amongst researchers to provide a positive review of arts activity. Researchers tend to 'work with organisations they like, whether it's creatively, artistically, or individually – when they happen to get on with the person that works there' (Taylor Inter-view 2019). They may be less critical than they might otherwise be, to protect the interests of the organisation, or to enable ongoing partnerships, or to satisfy the terms of the contract. Saara Moisio identified that she needed 'to be aware that because I know some of the people in these companies [that she researches] I need to be careful that I don't let these personal relations influence the way I analyse data' (Moisio Interview 2019). They may feel a sense of responsibility to the research participants who have contributed information. If, for example, keen symphony orchestra audience members participate in research that nonetheless finds that investment in orchestral music is not justifiable, the researcher may be torn between rec-ommending withdrawal of funding and their awareness of the research participants' attach-ment, and so their disappointment if this were to happen. This is an interesting dilemma in relation to one of the key principles of the Declaration of Helsinki: 'considerations related to the wellbeing of the human subject should take precedence over science and society.' While 'society' may benefit from the redirection of public funding from the symphony orchestra to a circus, the 'human subject' may wish for the symphony orchestra to continue playing because they enjoy its music. Hadley suggested that researcher reflexiveness might well in-volve acknowledging the research participant's personal cultural value by asking research participants: 'How would you feel about this audience research project if you knew that it might result in the closure of a major national cultural institution in your city? Would you still do it?' (Hadley Interview 2019).

## *Ethical research is designed to be sensitive to its social and political context*

Over the past two decades, audience research has been increasingly valued by funding agen-cies and arts organisations, which face greater public accountability for the spending of public funds and competition for audience's entertainment time. One response to this is the development of quality metrics research. Quality metrics refer to studies that seek to quan-tify the value of an arts activity, usually by surveying audiences – amongst others – about their experience of the aesthetic qualities of that activity, using a numerical scale to collect responses. The metrics produced are designed to be comparable to other arts activities by other organisations or artists and to prior activities by the same producer. Quality metrics

were very much in vogue amongst funding agencies, including Arts Council England, in the 2010s, and so attracted a significant response from researchers of the creative industries (e.g. Phiddian et al. 2017; Throsby 2017). The development of the tools is only rarely overseen by academic researchers, and tends instead to be driven by research consultancies.

This means that quality metrics research often sits outside the scrutiny of research ethics procedures. As Haggerty (2004, 395) observes, university researchers express concern about the ethical implications of knowledge production that takes place in professions that are not regulated. Three kinds of ethical concerns with metrics tools were raised by interviewees. Firstly, they were sceptical of the promises made by quality metrics researchers, doubting that it was possible to quantify creative or cultural value, and so see the promise of quality metrics as 'fool's gold' (Hadley Interview 2019). Secondly, researchers whose interest lies as much with artistic production as consumption identify an ethical problem with the practice of funding agencies requiring arts organisations to employ quality metrics, which 'violates the idea of self-determination' by rejecting organisations' ability to source their own quality assessment regime (Brown Interview 2019). Thirdly, the interviewees described concern at the notion that the judgements of audiences should be a determining factor behind the funding allocation or strategic decisions of the production company, without regard to the intention and culture of the producers. This is particularly notable when the production reflects a minority culture and audiences for that production are from a majority culture: 'Imagine having white people adjudicating the artistic quality of an Indigenous theatre piece. There's so much wrong with that!' (Brown Interview 2019).

The parties affected by these ethical issues include the funding agencies, which commission quality metrics programmes based on an unrealisable offer. They also include the arts organisations – unable to conduct and rely on their own quality assessment strategies. Finally, ethical issues relate to the creative producers – at the mercy of audience judgement, no matter how well- or ill-informed the audience might be about the artform and its broader cultural significance. These three parties – funding agencies, arts organisations and producers – intersect with the research project in different ways. The aim of quality metrics systems is itself an ethical one: to assess the reception of publicly funded artistic work in order to inform future policy and funding decisions associated with providing public funding for artistic work. But acting ethically in this context requires the researcher to design their research within the broader social and political networks in which it is conducted.

A fourth concern extends beyond quality metrics to any analysis of quantitative datasets more broadly. The concern here is based on experienced researchers' anticipation of a growing negative reaction from people surveyed, particularly in an era in which the rights to access and to withhold personal data are growing issues: 'People don't like being treated as a data point. People want to be understood as fully realised humans' (Taylor Interview 2019). This is a 'macro–ethics' issue because it involves reflecting on the necessity and design of the project, and is influenced by the context of other research taking place with the same participant groups. Because it relates to a sense that people are being 'mined' for data over a number of touchpoints in their everyday lives, it is perhaps greater in scope than a single ethics committee can respond to.

## How research is or is not disseminated has ethical implications

Possibly the single common ethical issue raised by our interviewees was the problem of how and to whom research findings are disseminated. Even with the most sensitive research design, taking into account the needs of participants and contextualised by the researcher's

sensitivity to the specific socio-political context, what happens to and with the research findings presents ethical challenges. This is an example of Brinkmann and Kvale's (2005) point that you can get the micro-ethics right, while also getting the macro-ethics wrong.

The two most common challenging behaviours involved in the dissemination of research are cherry-picking by partners or users of research, and the hiding of research. The arts and cultural sector suffers from a predisposition to 'overlook analysing failure [and] overcoming its myopia towards advocacy' (Selwood 2019, 348). Arts/cultural organisations commission research into the impact of their activities often with a particular focus on the impact for audiences. Once the research is produced, the findings are cherry-picked by industry partners in order to reinforce a particular marketing message:

> I always say "We're going to give you the research and it's up to you what you do with it" … but cherry picking is really worrying. There's this preference for quantitative data over qualitative data, which can qualify those figures, which is really problematic. People just give you a figure that has no meaning or context, to meet their own ends.
>
> *(Walmsley Interview 2019)*

Research commissioned by funding and policy agencies is also often used for political purposes beyond (or outside) the intention of the original research, resulting in only a partial or inaccurate version of the data being released. Reinforcing Selwood's view on the inaccuracy of data use, Hadley pointed out that, 'It's not in [the commissioning agency's] interests to produce really accurate data. It doesn't tell a story they want to tell. So, the ethics of who you ask, and how and why, is political' (Hadley Interview 2019).

As often as research is 'cherry-picked' for findings that compliment the agency that commissioned it, it is also simply hidden when the findings are not complimentary. Researchers may find themselves failing on a promise to research participants: having enjoined participants to see the potential downstream benefits of participation (for example access to results) they may find that the finished research project is never published.

> The wider and more interesting question is "how do you engage ethically with the fact that your research will most likely be ignored?" Because we're at the point now where we're through the looking glass on the evidence-based policy agenda and we know that there's a significant amount of evidence that is simply ignored.
>
> *(Hadley Interview 2019)*

This is the opposite problem to the one described in the section above, where participants may find themselves contributing to research that leads to the closure of the very artistic productions they love. In this case, the evidence that participants so carefully contribute may lead to no action at all, which compounds the jaundice and fatigue with which requests to participate in research are likely to be met. The hiding of research also limits the capacity of the arts sector as a whole. Non-commissioning organisations miss out on the findings of research that other organisations have commissioned, again due to their competitive environment, so: 'An enormous amount of intellectual property that might benefit practitioners does not' (Brown Interview 2019).

Researchers might also be complicit in this practice of hiding research. This accusation may be levelled at both consultancy-based and scholarly researchers, but for different reasons. Private consultants often have an interest in avoiding the public dissemination of their work:

> [T]hey make money by repeating studies that have already been done. And so there's no incentive for researchers to advocate for dissemination because it might result in people not commissioning work because the work has been done already and just needs to be revisited.
>
> *(Brown Interview 2019)*

For scholarly research, there are few efforts to translate scholarship for a practitioner audience, or to make it available beyond expensive scholarly publications. James Doeser's CultureCase, the Centre for Cultural Value at the University of Leeds and Arts Professional – all based in the UK – are initiatives that do provide such translation (see also Chapter 15, by Walmsley and Meyrick in this collection).

While researchers working with audiences grapple with how to ensure their involvement of research participants is ethical, they must also be aware of the macro-ethics of how their research is enabled, made available or disguised and manipulated. The pressure on audience research to represent arts activities favourably or to confirm existing policies, and the pressure on researchers to work in a competitive research context, are all issues that influence researchers' resolve to behave ethically when research projects are contracted and designed.

## Conclusion: future directions for ethics in audience research

For researchers entering into research with audiences, the arguments presented in this chapter are intended to assist the development of a rigorous sensibility towards the ethics of researching audiences. The first argument is that audience members' contribution to research requires the researcher to engage in complex thinking about the safeguards we offer them, and what their participation means in the context of their own lives. Privacy, confidentiality and informed consent are not the limits of our responsibility to audience members; sensitivity to them, their environment and needs may well be more important. These needs may well include the need to be actively engaged, and perhaps personally identified. This ethical capacity requires researchers to think critically and independently, 'not taking the values, principles and standards found in codes of ethics or current practice for granted' (Banks 2018, 29).

The second argument is that the ethics involved in audience research is of significantly greater scope than those associated specifically with working with participants. Researchers have a responsibility to the commissioning parties, who in turn have an ethical responsibility to the research project, future research and the stakeholders who seek to make evidence-based decisions, to represent and disseminate the research appropriately. To participate in this process, researchers need the capacity to 'perceive the features of a situation that have ethical salience, and to make discerning judgements about what the right course of action might be, given the context and particular circumstances at hand' (Banks 2018, 29).

There are implications here for the training of researchers, which is currently limited because audience research is still an emerging field. Martin Barker bemoans the lack of experience of many audience researchers who 'with no background in the field and no training step in at the last minute and think, "I can do that. That doesn't look very difficult"' (Barker Interview 2019). Similarly, many PhD supervisors have 'no knowledge themselves and no experience of doing audience research... They never went out to an external expert or someone with experience in the field' (Barker Interview 2019). Moisio, who is currently working on her doctoral thesis, identified the problem of audience research still being an emerging discipline, so that 'there isn't a big book to instruct you on how to do audience research'

(Moisio Interview 2019). Particular training and skills development issues arise when considering audience research using ethnographic methods:

> I think there's a risk that we're making it up as we go along and [where] audience research … is going more down the anthropological route or certainly a kind of deep ethnography and a health route … that has really significant implications for how we do or don't train audience researchers in the future.
>
> *(Walmsley Interview 2019)*

There is a pronounced need for 'more rigorous social sciences training for [researchers] so we're more aware of the nuances of … what it means to be embedded in the community, what responsibilities that brings with it' (Walmsley Interview 2019).

All of this runs counter to the current training that many new researchers are provided with, which emphasises research ethics as 'a matter of learning a set of rules and how to implement them (so as to satisfy institutional research governance requirements)' (Banks 2018: 35). Rather, there should be more emphasis on a process of critical reflection. For example, Matthew Reason commented:

> When you're facilitating a discussion group, I certainly am very aware of protocols and procedures in terms of asking open questions and being neutral and creating the right atmosphere and giving everyone an opportunity to talk, for example. When you're doing interviews, it's probably much more messy. And you're aware of the methodological [protocols] in theory but you're a human being in a conversation, so you adapt intuitively and empathetically. I find quite a few participants in tears in interviews, I'm sure we all have. Mainly good tears, it's pretty deep stuff.
>
> *(Reason Interview 2019)*

As well as training, audience research lacks strong protocols for the dissemination of research, which could facilitate sector-wide learning. Alan Brown suggests that 'foundations could grant funds in a way that assures field learning. For example, using advisory groups and practitioners to help interpret the results, so that others are exposed to the results' (Brown Interview 2019). The protocols might also include a general standard of disclosure whereby the intellectual property of research projects is released after an agreed period. This would address the ethical problem of 'all the studies that are collecting dust on the server' when they could instead inform the sector as a whole (see the Centre for Cultural Value's work on this topic).

Finally, the ethics of future audience research would be well-served by a set of protocols for researchers as well, which might address the various risks set out in this chapter. This chapter has sought to describe the impact of different research methods and approaches for involving research participants and stakeholders, research design and dissemination expectations and standards, so that future training and protocols may be developed that assist researchers maximise the positive ethics associated with their research and avoid the risks of negative research. These strategies will help to ensure that future ethical researchers, who are continuously reflective throughout the project about their conduct and its impact on the world (Rossman and Rallis 2010; Allen and Israel 2018).

## Acknowledgement

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Brown, Alan. Interview 2019: Arts Consultant at WolfBrown, USA.

Conner, Lynne. Interview 2019: Department of Theatre, University of North Carolina Charlotte, USA.

Dunphy, Kim. Interview 2019: Creative Arts and Music Therapy, University of Melbourne, Australia.

Hadley, Steven. Interview 2019: School of Music, University of Sheffield, UK.

Moisio, Saara. Interview 2019: Department of Philosophy, History and Art Studies, University of Helsinki, Finland.

Reason, Matthew. Interview 2019: Theatre and Performance School, York St John University, UK.

Sedgman, Kirsty. Interview 2019: Department of Theatre, University of Bristol, UK.

Taylor, Mark. Interview 2019: Sheffield Methods Institute, University of Sheffield, UK.

Walmsley, Ben. Interview 2019: School of Performance and Cultural Industries, University of Leeds, UK.

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