

# INTRODUCTION: MAKING MODELS OF CONTEMPORARY SERIAL MEDIA PRODUCTS

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Considering the contemporary mediascape, the abundance of both media products and analytic tools can be an interesting challenge. Several techniques have been developed for analyzing data contained in digital collections, such as tools for collecting data, text mining, geographical mapping, image analysis, network visualization or audience measurement approaches (Ross et al. 2009, Smith and Telang 2016). Scholars and industry-based researchers must identify which tools exist, get acquainted with their capabilities, and decide which one is more suitable for their purpose. However, there are some obstacles that separate the traditional researcher in media studies from the use of modeling methods, such as “the required knowledge of computational technology

and of different research methods, in particular statistics” (Noordegraaf 2016: 55). These factors create “a gap [...] between the affordances of digital data and computational tools, and their application in media studies, despite the growing number of successful experiments in this area” (Noordegraaf 2016: 52).

Traditional approaches in media studies focus on specific elements of analysis such as evaluations of style and narrative form, economic and production studies, and audience analyses. One of the challenges of studying long-running television dramas can be capturing a clear “picture” of textual trends, production issues and audience response over time. Like studying an extended corpus of fiction, such as the body of

work that comprises a national literature, long-running television series provide much more material than a close-up view can incorporate. If we consider qualitative and quantitative models as simplified representations of complex phenomena, they might help us organize and structure information, clarify our reasoning, communicate, solve problems and predict events. This last question is central. While quantitative models give us information about the magnitude of variation, and are based on a quantitative representation of the system, qualitative models inform us about the direction of change and maximize generality and realism at the expense of precision. Both modeling approaches might be a potentially fruitful way to answer some challenges in the contemporary mediascape.

Recently, Hennig-Thurau and Houston (2019) propose the use of *Entertainment Science* to overcome the problematic implications hidden in both approaches represented by the traditional “Nobody-Knows-Anything” mantra and the data-driven “new way”, which argued that big data and complex analytics can function as an alternative to gut-feeling-based decision-making process for entertainment products. They suggest combining the use of data analytics with powerful theories in *Entertainment Science*. Theory needs testing, and this issue proposes some modeling methods to grasp different aspects related to serial media products.

The aim of this collection is to develop, and promote discussion of, qualitative and quantitative methods, in addition to more traditional ones, for studying television series. Indeed, a methodological hybridity characterizes media studies, which seeks to expand the investigatory frameworks of the phenomena of interest, situating them within the entire media system (including production, distribution and consumption) and their social, cultural and political contexts. In this perspective, adopting qualitative and quantitative modeling approaches can create an interesting perspective and enhance the development of future research fields. For example, in the study of individual programs, or particular sites of production, consumption, and reception, or of audience response, modeling approaches might help to identify textual and contextual features that correlate with the persistence of particular programs over time; the ability of particular shows to adjust their form or market appeal in response to changing contextual conditions; and the ways in which different production, distribution, or exhibition contexts influence textual form and/or audience response.

This issue of *SERIES* will offer some examples of both new (three of the articles are defined by their authors as a “pilot

study”) and innovative, under-utilized tools that may point towards future applications of qualitative and quantitative models in media studies. Let us take a closer look at how the articles contribute to the special issue.

Hunter’s opening contribution, “Predicting Nielsen Ratings from Pilot Episodes Scripts: A Content Analytical Approach”, analyzes pilot episode scripts of 183 new dramatic American series appearing on the four major networks in the US. He extracts several descriptive statistics by applying content analysis or using information contained therein, and demonstrates that script-based factors such as “originality”, the creator’s “track record of success”, and “cognitive complexity” can be useful to predict Nielsen [18–49] ratings over the first five episodes of the first season of each series.

Qualitative modeling technique is the centre of “Insights into serial narratives through qualitative modelling techniques”, where Rocchi and Chiarello propose a new point of view in the analysis of serial narratives through the use of loop analysis. The methodology was developed in an ecological context, and the authors adapted it by first identifying the steps to the narrative context and then focusing on a specific case study. The focus is on the last season of *Game of Thrones* and the main aim is to connect the narrative domain to the economic one in an evaluative/predictive perspective.

Lazzaretti analyzes the British television drama *Downton Abbey* by applying corpus linguistics methodologies. In her article “‘I’ve been nowhere and done nothing’: The characterization of Daisy Mason in the British drama *Downton Abbey*”, she investigates the characterisation of Daisy Mason, a fictional secondary character of the series, based on episode transcripts of the first three seasons. She associates relevant aspects of the character personality with typical features of her speech, which are compared with those of other characters to explore how language is used to create the character identity.

In her article “An Introduction to Network Visualization for Television Studies: Models and Practical Applications”, Taurino focuses on the use of network visualizations for humanistic research. She discusses the related challenges in adopting visual model as a data-discovery process, and suggests that network visualization might be the key for observing the relations (e.g. institutional, industrial, cultural) underlying television series, and offers an overview on the methodological path to its use. Two anthology series (*Black Mirror* and *The Twilight Zone*) are taken as practical applications considering them in three different ways: television series as networks, as nodes of the network, and as links.

Finally, in “Video Scene Segmentation of TV Series Using Multimodal Neural Features”, Berhe, Barras and Guinandeau use artificial intelligence methods to propose an unsupervised automatic scene segmentation for TV series in order to extract and understand their narrative structures. The method is tested using *Game of Thrones* and *Breaking Bad*. Using an unsupervised method to extract and study narrative structures of serial narratives is valuable because it might allow the immediate use on other products.

In general, the articles of this special issue on Making Models of Contemporary Serial Media Products contribute to the field of media studies in various and interesting ways. Obviously, the most important level is the methodological one, because the articles represent a research area that engages with innovative and heterogeneous approaches to the study of TV series. Perhaps the greatest contribution of computational research in media studies is that it invites a clear articulation of the theoretical approach, the chosen method, and the selection of sources and means of analysis.

For future work, it would be interesting to extend some of these perspectives to additional ones in order to discover patterns, trends, or characteristics of serial television that would otherwise not be straightforward, such as processing textual objects through the use of automated software (Konstantinos and Giannakopoulos 2016); analysis of social discursivity among communities of spectators and fans by using digital tools – such as large data sets obtained online and from social media and analyzed through automated software (Hoffman et al. 2018); and evaluation of production and consumption processes through social network analysis.

On behalf of the authors and editors, I wish the reader an inspiring experience. We hope it will promote future research that will further integrate and develop the application of under-utilized tools for building both qualitative and quantitative models to the study of serial media products.

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