

# CoPro interviewing: understanding audiences through co-constructed proxy interviews

Lene Heiselberg

University of Southern Denmark, Odense, Denmark

Received 5 March 2025  
Revised 23 March 2025  
Accepted 23 March 2025

## Abstract

**Purpose** – This study proposes CoPro interviewing as a participatory method in qualitative research and examines its value in audience research and journalistic practice.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The study takes a qualitative approach, drawing on the concepts of proxy interviewing (Cammett, 2013) and structured facilitation tools like concept cards (Sutton, 2011). A case study of a Danish media company illustrates the implementation of CoPro interviewing, including its advantages and challenges.

**Findings** – The study shows that CoPro interviewing enhances audience engagement by enabling media professionals to serve as intermediaries in qualitative research. It finds that CoPro interviewing facilitates candid dialogue, builds trust and allows for more nuanced audience insights. However, challenges include potential biases introduced by intermediaries, constraints of structured tools and the need for training to ensure methodological rigor.

**Originality/value** – This study contributes to the growing body of research on participatory qualitative methods. It offers a novel methodological approach, CoPro interviewing, that integrates media professionals into audience research.

**Keywords** Participatory research, Qualitative interviews, Concept cards, CoPro interviewing, Proxy interviewing

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

Qualitative research increasingly embraces participatory approaches, recognizing participants as active co-creators of knowledge and emphasizing collaboration and mutual understanding between researchers and participants. Co-constructed interviewing is an example of how qualitative research methods prioritize participatory approaches. Co-constructed interviewing is a relational method of conversational interviewing that focuses on facilitating and examining collaborative meaning-making (Bochner and Ellis, 1995). According to Bochner and Ellis (1995) this approach has a long history and has emerged from postmodern, ethnographic, interpersonal, narrative, autobiographical, and critical turns in the academy. The co-constructed interview method, as outlined by Patti and Ellis (2017), emphasizes the relational and dialogic nature of qualitative inquiry. This approach views interviews not as extractive but as collaborative processes of meaning-making. By sharing authority over the trajectory and content of the interview, researchers and participants engage in a dialogic exchange that blurs the traditional boundaries between interviewer and participant (Patti and Ellis, 2017). Co-constructed interviews also align with ethical considerations in qualitative research. They challenge hierarchical research relationships, positioning participants as experiential authorities and co-creators of knowledge. This ethical orientation underscores the

---

I want to thank the TV Syd employees, especially the CEO, Betina Bendix, for participating. Furthermore, I am grateful for the rewarding collaboration with strategy consultant Dianna Skotte.

*AI statement:* During the preparation of this work, I used ChatGPT for proofreading. After using this tool, I reviewed and edited the content as needed, taking full responsibility for the publication's content.

*Conflict of interest:* The author reported no potential conflict of interest.

*Funding:* No funding was obtained for this work.

*Data availability statement:* Data is not available due to a contract with TV Syd.



---

potential of dialogic methods to produce richer data and more equitable and inclusive research practices (Patti and Ellis, 2017).

This article advances participatory approaches and co-constructed interviewing by introducing co-constructed proxy (CoPro) interviews as an innovative qualitative method for audience research. The CoPro interviewing method facilitates dialogic audience research by training intermediaries—such as media professionals—to conduct interviews in a way that prioritizes audience perspectives. CoPro interviewing is beneficial in various research contexts, particularly in media research, where journalists and media professionals aim to understand their audiences but lack established methods for engaging them beyond content analytics. By conceptualizing and formalizing CoPro interviewing as a distinct methodological contribution, this article:

- (1) Theorizes CoPro interviewing as a participatory method grounded in qualitative research traditions.
- (2) Provides a systematic framework for implementing the method across different research contexts.
- (3) Critically evaluates its advantages, limitations, and future refinements.

The paper begins by outlining the related research and methodological foundations of CoPro interviewing, which leads to the framework. It then details the case, research process, and data collection methods. The paper concludes with a discussion of methodological lessons learned, emphasizing practices to enhance the quality of CoPro interviewing. Finally, it discusses the strengths, challenges, and future refinements of CoPro interviewing.

### **Related research and methodological roots of CoPro interviewing**

Participatory approaches have gained prominence not only in qualitative research but also across various fields. In journalism, listening-first strategies and the audience turn reflect this shift toward participatory methodologies. Both trends emphasize reciprocal engagement, the co-creation of knowledge, and the integration of audience perspectives into meaning-making processes. Meijer and Costera (2020) describe the audience turn as a paradigm shift in journalism studies that reframes audiences not as passive consumers but as active participants in the journalistic process. This shift underscores the growing recognition that journalism must evolve from a one-directional flow of information to a dialogic relationship with its audience (Meijer and Costera, 2020; Swart *et al.*, 2022).

Since the late 1990s, audience participation has also been a strategic priority in the journalism industry. Maasø *et al.* (2007) identify seven key drivers behind this development: cost efficiency, audience loyalty, enhancing customer relationships, creating new revenue streams, innovation, staying competitive, and meeting audience demand. These motivations reflect a dual focus on economic sustainability and engagement with the news audience as active participants.

Addressing the growing divide between newsrooms and their audiences is essential for sustaining democratic values and fostering informed public participation (Heise *et al.*, 2014; Holton *et al.*, 2020; Loosen *et al.*, 2020; Metykova, 2017; Nelson, 2021). Listening and dialogue have emerged as transformative strategies to bridge this gap (Nelson, 2021). Recent initiatives, such as pilot projects at the German *Lausitzer Rundschau* and *Märkische Oderzeitung*, illustrate how structured audience engagement can enhance coverage and representation (Haustein-Teßmer, 2024). These projects employ facilitated dialogues and anonymous storytelling to create nuanced content that reflects diverse lived experiences. Haustein-Teßmer (2024) argues that: “Listening-first approaches are not just tools for improving journalism—they are a necessity for its survival” (Haustein-Teßmer, 2024).

Inspired by audience participation trends in academia and the media industry, news organizations have increasingly redefined their approaches to address the challenges of

shifting audience consumption habits. Many news media outlets have recognized that their journalists and editors often have limited meaningful contact and engagement with their audiences, relying heavily on intuition rather than direct interaction with them. In response, some news organizations have shifted their focus from traditional quantitative metrics, such as viewership numbers, to more qualitative, engagement-driven strategies, for instance, by focusing on user needs, as seen with The BBC and BuzzFeed (Shishkin, 2022). By directly engaging with audiences, visiting communities, and encouraging dialogue, news organizations aim to gain firsthand, nuanced insights into user preferences, habits, and expectations, moving beyond generalized assumptions. This shift has led to the development of audience-focused initiatives aimed at enhancing understanding and responsiveness to audience needs.

This direct engagement deepens audience insights and holds particular value when media employees conduct the interviews, as their professional expertise enables them to contextualize audience responses within the framework of editorial and journalistic practices. By actively participating in the data collection process, media employees can bridge the gap between audience perspectives and newsroom decision-making.

#### *Proxy interviewing as an access strategy: media employees as interviewers*

CoPro interviewing is inspired by the concept of “proxy interviewing”. The concept of proxy interviewing is typically used as a qualitative research technique that involves gathering information from individuals who are not the primary subjects of the study, often due to the unavailability or incapacity of the primary subjects, i.e. someone answers on behalf of the individual whose quality of life is to be assessed (by “proxy”). This method is particularly useful in healthcare, where patients may be unable to articulate their experiences due to cognitive impairments or other barriers (Rand *et al.*, 2017; Schalock *et al.*, 2002). However, Cammett (2013) proposed using the concept differently. She defines proxy interviewing as a research strategy to address the challenges posed by outsider positionality when conducting in-depth interviews with non-elites in sensitive or politically charged contexts. It involves recruiting and training local individuals, such as graduate students or other skilled interviewers, who are embedded in the relevant social networks of the target population. These proxy interviewers use their cultural, social, or identity-based alignment with participants to build trust, establish rapport, and gather more valid and detailed information than might be possible for a researcher directly. CoPro interviewing builds on Cammett’s conceptualization. Before outlining CoPro interviewing, I want to emphasize that, in Cammett’s understanding, proxy interviewing is not entirely new, as survey research has long employed intermediaries to conduct interviews. CoPro interviewing extends Cammett’s practices, and therefore, the approaches differ in three ways: First, Cammett’s proxy interviewing relies on trusted intermediaries (e.g. community insiders) to access marginalized or skeptical groups. The method is designed to overcome barriers such as mistrust or sensitivity by distancing the researcher from direct contact. In contrast, CoPro interviewing involves a more participatory approach, where intermediaries (media professionals) are actively trained to use structured tools, such as concept cards, to facilitate reflective and meaningful exchanges. The co-construction lies in the joint effort between researchers, intermediaries, and participants to shape the interview process and outcomes. Second, CoPro interviewing significantly benefits the intermediaries (media professionals). Media professionals gain firsthand insights into perceptions and expectations through direct engagement with audience members, creating a stronger connection with their audience. Cammett’s method, while effective for gathering data, does not inherently emphasize reflection for the intermediaries involved. In CoPro interviewing, intermediaries also reflect on their learning, summarized in digital user portraits, which enriches both their understanding and the research process. Third, Cammett’s method is designed primarily for sensitive political or social research involving marginalized populations, while CoPro interviewing bridges the

---

gap between journalists and audiences. This shift from addressing societal barriers to rethinking institutional practices broadens the application and scope of proxy interviewing.

To guide the media professionals, many of whom are trained journalists, it was necessary to identify an approach to retrain them effectively. Journalists are often accustomed to taking the lead in conversations; therefore, they needed to develop a new discipline focused on listening and facilitation. Sutton's (2011) work provides valuable inspiration, offering methods to shift their practices toward a more participant-centered approach. Sutton explores the potential of concept cards to facilitate rich narratives. These methods offer participants a tangible and engaging means to articulate their experiences, particularly in contexts involving sensitive or personal topics. Applied research has described similar methods (see, e.g. Borch, 2012). Sutton's concept cards approach, for instance, helped participants organize and prioritize their thoughts and illuminated hidden or contested issues that might otherwise remain unspoken. The cards provided a visual and tactile dimension to the research process, encouraging participants to engage with abstract and emotional themes. The cards prompted participants to reflect on interconnected experiences by presenting keywords, revealing patterns, contradictions, and simultaneous themes that might otherwise remain fragmented or overlooked (Sutton, 2011). Moreover, Sutton's method underscores the importance of adapting research tools to the specific needs of participants. By employing a technique that blended structure with flexibility, she created a participatory environment that respected the agency of her participants while eliciting nuanced and layered insights. Such approaches demonstrate the potential for qualitative methods to bridge gaps in understanding between researchers and participants, particularly in contexts where power dynamics and sensitivities play a significant role (Sutton, 2011).

In sum, the methodological roots of CoPro interviewing, grounded in participatory approaches like proxy interviewing and concept cards, illustrate its potential to bridge the divide between media professionals, such as journalists, and their audiences by focusing on dialogue and collaboration while addressing the evolving demands of audience-centered journalism.

### **The CoPro interviewing framework**

To operationalize CoPro interviewing, this article outlines a step-by-step methodological framework that is applicable across various research contexts.

#### *Step 1: Selection and training of intermediaries*

- Identify intermediaries (e.g. media professionals) who directly engage with the audience but require methodological training.
- Conduct preliminary workshops to train intermediaries in facilitation techniques, emphasizing active listening and non-directive questioning.
- Introduce structured tools such as concept cards to help guide conversations while maintaining participant agency.

#### *Step 2: Structured, flexible interview facilitation*

- CoPro interviews balance structure and flexibility. Concept cards act as prompts to encourage storytelling without imposing rigid question sequences.
- Intermediaries are instructed to:
  - Establish rapport through informal conversation.
  - Use concept cards to guide—but not dominate—the discussion.
  - Ensure participants speak most of the time, with minimal interruptions.

---

*Step 3: Reflexive documentation and analysis*

- Intermediaries document interviews through a combination of audio recordings, notes, and participant-selected photographs.
  - A post-interview summary (i.e. digital user portrait) captures the intermediaries' reflections, highlighting what surprised them or challenged their assumptions.
  - The researcher conducts thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022), integrating intermediary reflections to contextualize findings.
- 

**Case illustration: research process, data collection, and qualitative data analysis***Background*

Inspired by audience participation trends in the media industry, the management at TV Syd [TV South], a regional Danish media outlet, was prompted by the realization that many of its employees had limited meaningful contact and engagement with their audience and wanted to move away from relying on editor and journalist gut feelings. Therefore, in 2024, they decided to visit audiences, marking a shift from their traditional focus on quantitative metrics, such as viewership numbers, to an approach that allowed the organization to gain firsthand, nuanced insights into user preferences, habits, and expectations, thereby moving beyond generalized assumptions about their audience. This decision led to the development of an audience-focused project to better understand the audience. Unlike traditional interactions between journalists and audiences, which are often limited to interviewing sources, this initiative aimed to establish genuine, equal exchanges that explored users' lives and perspectives. The project involved employees visiting audience members in their homes to create digital "user portraits" reflecting their daily lives and news media interactions. The author of this paper designed the process and conducted a qualitative data analysis to derive insights from these portraits.

*The case*

TV Syd's approach to better understanding its audience serves as a fitting example to illustrate the design, application, and potential of the CoPro interviewing method. TV Syd is a regional public service media outlet in Denmark. It serves the southern part of the Jutland peninsula, focusing on regional news, cultural programming, and content relevant to local communities. As part of the Danish public broadcasting system, TV Syd is mandated to provide impartial and high-quality journalism while addressing its regional audience's specific needs and interests. TV Syd publishes on linear TV, streaming TV, the web, and social media. To address the challenges posed by shifting audience consumption habits, TV Syd adopted a user-centered approach, shifting its focus from focusing solely on quantitative metrics like viewership numbers to also considering qualitative insights into audience preferences, habits, and expectations. In short, TV Syd employees, including management, conducted 50 in-home visits with audience members to create 50 "user portraits"—digital representations of their daily lives and media interactions. A professional recruitment company, Kantar Gallup, recruited 50 participants belonging to three groups of TV Syd users: (1) weekly users, (2) users who engage at least once a month, and (3) users who engage less frequently than once a month. The author of this paper reused the portraits and analyzed them qualitatively to identify audience preferences, habits, and expectations. Insights from this analysis informed the design of a quantitative audience survey comprising 1,009 online interviews. The survey was representative of TV Syd's broadcasting area, and Kantar Gallup collected this data in weeks 16 and 17 of 2024. The combined findings were presented to TV Syd staff and management, leading to actionable strategies co-developed with a strategy consultant, Diana Skotte.

---

*Before interviewing*

The research process began with an introductory workshop where media professionals were trained in CoPro interviewing and using concept cards. TV Syd employees then visited 50 audience members in their homes, working in pairs, one acting as the interviewer and the other handling logistical responsibilities. These visits were structured using concept cards to guide the conversations and ensure uniformity across the interviews. To guide the employees, I developed a short guide for them to follow. It provided instructions for conducting audience visits. The guide included information on what to do while preparing for the visit, such as items to bring, including the user's contact details, a travel itinerary, printed concept cards, a mobile phone for recording, a notebook, and writing tools. The rest of the guide's content is introduced below.

---

*During interviewing*

Upon arrival, the team introduced themselves and explained their roles—one as the interviewer and the other as the manager of practical tasks, such as note-taking and photography. The guide encouraged the team to set a conversational tone by engaging in small talk before explaining the project. Participants were informed about the purpose of the visits and reassured that the interviews were strictly for internal use, particularly for creating visual and textual summaries to be shared with other employees at TV Syd and with me as the researcher. It was also emphasized that the conversation would be recorded, but for the purpose of knowledge, not for publication on TV Syd's platforms. Additionally, the guide emphasized that the interaction format was a narrative-based conversation, where the participant did most of the talking, rather than a traditional structured or journalistic interview. The employees from TV Syd explained that the goal was for participants to dominate the conversation, intervening only to clarify or probe deeper into certain topics. In further detail, all interviews followed the guide in [Table 1](#).

This guide emphasizes respectful and engaging interactions with users, ensuring their comfort and the opportunity to share their stories while gathering meaningful insights for TV Syd.

As mentioned above, the interviews were structured using concept cards to guide the conversation while allowing participants to skip irrelevant topics. Ten concept cards were used, one of which was a practice card on their use of soda, and the last was asking for a piece of advice; the rest carried the titles: Me, About me, My day, I think, Media use, News, TV Syd, Programs at TV Syd, My best piece of advice for TV Syd. Examples of narration starters are visualized in [Figures 1 and 2](#).

The cards were created, entailing different narration starters. This helps to ensure that the participants avoid answering “yes”, “no”, or “maybe”, but tells stories instead. This systematic approach ensured consistency across visits, promoted meaningful audience engagement, and generated qualitative data that was rich in detail and directly tied to participants' lived experiences.

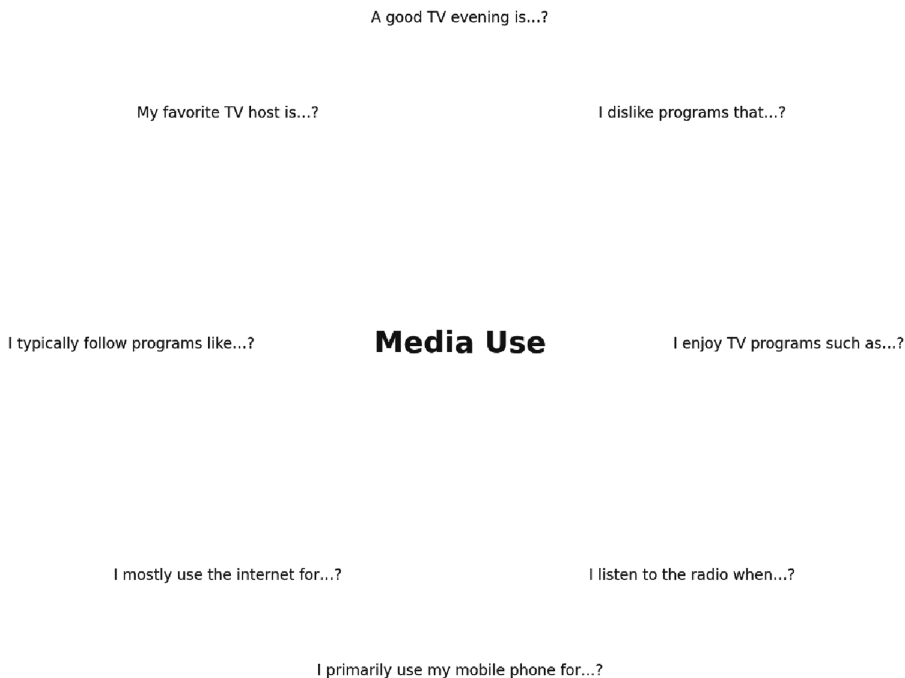
Following the interview, a brief photography session was conducted to capture images that reflected the participant's environment and lifestyle. These photographs included general views of the home and specific items representing the participant's personality, such as bookshelves, artwork, or objects mentioned during the interview. A mandatory photograph featured the participant in a typical situation where they used TV Syd. Care was taken to avoid private spaces such as bedrooms or bathrooms, and a minimum of ten horizontal photographs were taken. Notably, the participant was asked to suggest images representing him/her/and everything in between.

Upon completion of the CoPro interviews, a debriefing was included ([Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015](#)), where the respondents were asked if they had any follow-up comments, wanted to participate in future studies, and then thanked for their participation.

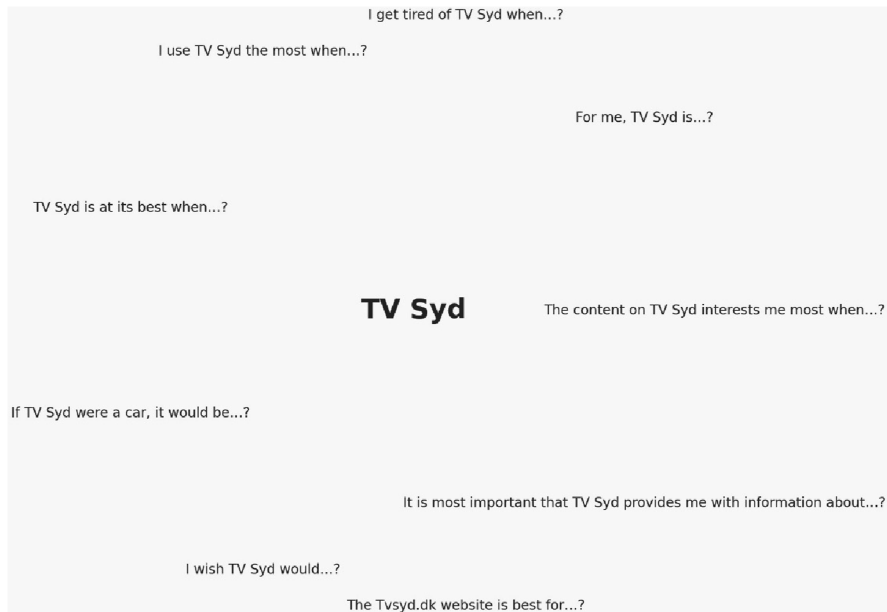
**Table 1.** Guide to CoPro interviewing for TV Syd employees

Introduction	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Engage in small talk and ask the participant where to sit</li> <li>2. Explain the purpose of the visit: to better understand audiences through 50 visits, which will inspire TV Syd’s coming strategy and internal processes</li> <li>3. Mention that the participant’s story will not appear on TV and explain that the session will include an interview using cards and a brief photo session</li> </ol>
Interview process	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>4. Use cards to guide the conversation</li> <li>5. Start with an example question (e.g. the soda card) and explain that the participant can skip any question they feel is irrelevant</li> <li>6. Record the session and take notes, focusing on timestamps for key quotes</li> <li>7. Allow the participant to do most of the talking (80%) and ask follow-up questions when necessary</li> </ol>
Photo session	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>8. Reconfirm permission to take photos</li> <li>9. First, ask if the participant has ideas for photos that show who they are</li> <li>10. Take a picture of the participant where they typically consume content from TV Syd</li> <li>11. Take horizontal photos showcasing the participant’s typical use of TV Syd and their environment (e.g. bookshelf, refrigerator, hobby materials, message board, newspapers, magazines, the car, DIY projects, and souvenirs)</li> <li>12. Take pictures illustrating the participant’s points in the interview</li> <li>13. Avoid private areas like bedrooms and bathrooms</li> <li>14. Aim for at least 10 photos</li> </ol>
Closing the visit	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>15. Thank the participant and ask if they would be open to providing feedback in the future</li> </ol>
Post-visit tasks	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>16. Save recordings and photos in a designated Teams folder</li> <li>17. Create a digital portrait summarizing the visit using a PowerPoint template</li> <li>18. Upload the completed portrait to the specified folder</li> </ol>

**Source(s):** Author’s work



**Figure 1.** Concept card on media use. Source: Author’s own work



**Figure 2.** Concept card on TV Syd. Source: Author's own work

### *After interviewing*

After the visits, the employees saved the audio recordings and photographs in a designated Teams folder. TV Syd employees created user portraits based on the interview recordings, notes, and photos using a PowerPoint template provided in advance. They were instructed to incorporate the participant's favorite piece of music as background audio to personalize the presentation. Furthermore, they were asked to summarize their central learning or insight on the last slide in the portrait, prompting them to reflect on what they had learned. This reflective exercise compels intermediaries to process and internalize what they have learned from the participant, enhancing their understanding of the audience's needs and perspectives. For the researcher, these summaries provide valuable insights into what the intermediaries found surprising or particularly significant. It highlights areas where TV Syd employees may have shifted their perceptions, indicating the effectiveness of the CoPro interviewing process in creating empathy and awareness.

In the portraits, the TV Syd employees combined interview insights with visual material from the visits to ensure clarity and ease of recall. The PowerPoint template included the headlines: (1) Describe the participant using quotes and pictures (2) Describe the participant's everyday life using quotes and pictures (3) Describe the participant's opinions, dreams, priorities, etc. using photos and quotes from interviews (4) Describe the participant's media usage using photos and quotes from interviews (5) Describe the participant's news consumption using photos and quotes from interviews (6) Describe the participant's relationship with, use of and attitude towards TV Syd. (7) End with the participant's best piece of advice to improve TV Syd.

### *Qualitative data analysis*

Following data collection, the portraits were reused in a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022) of all 50 digital portraits. This process involved systematically reviewing and coding each portrait's quotes, visual elements, and key themes to identify recurring patterns and

insights. Particular attention was paid to audience behavior, including media consumption habits, interaction with TV Syd's content, and their preferences for programming and storytelling styles. Additionally, the analysis explored participants' perceptions of TV Syd's role in their daily lives, focusing on how the station aligned with their expectations and needs. The findings were then synthesized to uncover overarching themes, providing a comprehensive understanding of audience engagement and the station's relevance in the regional media landscape.

The results of the qualitative and quantitative analysis, along with select portraits, were presented to TV Syd's management and staff. This presentation was designed to provide actionable insights to guide strategic decision-making within the organization.

### **Critical reflection on strengths and challenges of CoPro interviewing**

#### *Strengths and challenges of CoPro interviewing*

CoPro interviewing offers a nuanced perspective on audience engagement and the role of media professionals, including journalists, as intermediaries in qualitative research. Extending [Cammatt's \(2013\)](#) conceptualization of proxy interviewing, the approach allowed TV Syd employees to explore and access participants' lived experiences. The advantages of CoPro interviewing include the possible candidness of participants, as they speak directly to employees from TV Syd. Using intermediaries—in this case, employees from TV Syd rather than a researcher they had no relation to—can enable participants to share their perspectives more freely, contributing to rich data. Media professionals may be perceived as capable of enacting change within the organization, which can encourage open and honest exchanges where participants believe they can directly influence the media companies. Furthermore, conducting interviews in participants' homes can enhance rapport, creating an environment that is conducive to a deeper understanding. These advantages align with [Cammatt's](#) argument that proxy interviewing can facilitate nuanced understandings by minimizing the intrusion or defensiveness that might arise in direct researcher-participant interactions.

The experience also presents opportunities for the employees. By stepping into the role of listener and facilitator, they can gain firsthand insights into audience perceptions, preferences, and frustrations. This direct engagement can enrich the data and strengthen the connection between TV Syd and its audience, exemplifying the potential for qualitative, participatory methods to advance the audience turn in journalism studies.

However, the approach is not without its challenges. As [Cammatt \(2013\)](#) notes, the effectiveness of proxy interviewing depends heavily on the skills and positionality of the intermediaries. While many TV Syd employees successfully facilitated meaningful exchanges, others faced challenges in doing so, with some expressing resistance from the very beginning to being assigned to engage with the audience. This, of course, affects the quality of the data material behind the portraits. Employee resistance can lead to disengaged or incomplete interactions, which can affect the depth, accuracy, and reliability of the data underpinning the portraits, as the quality of user insights is contingent on the effectiveness of the intermediaries' engagement.

Additionally, the separation between data collection and analysis introduces potential biases, as researchers rely on portraits—summarized representations of the CoPro interviews—rather than direct engagement with raw data. This limitation mirrors broader critiques of proxy methods ([Cammatt, 2013](#); [Ison, 2009](#)), highlighting the need for reflexivity in managing potential distortions introduced by intermediaries.

Moreover, retraining journalists and other media professionals to adopt a participant-centered approach requires significant adjustments. Inspired by [Sutton's \(2011\)](#) work on qualitative methods, particularly her use of concept cards, the study employed dialogue cards to structure interviews. This technique encourages journalists to facilitate rather than dominate conversations, a significant departure from their usual practices. Like Sutton's concept cards, the cards were tangible tools to elicit the participants' reflective and nuanced narratives. They allowed

---

participants to pick and choose between narration starters to explore interconnected themes and articulate complex or contested issues in an engaging and accessible way.

Disadvantages of concept cards include the risk of inadvertently constraining spontaneous or emergent topics that participants might otherwise bring up organically, potentially limiting the depth of exploration beyond the pre-defined themes. Furthermore, there may be bias in topic selection, as pre-determining the topics or themes on the cards, researchers may introduce bias by privileging specific issues over others and possibly shaping the direction of the conversation in ways that reflect the researcher's assumptions rather than the participant's perspectives. Moreover, using concept cards may shift the focus from the natural flow of conversation to the mechanics of using the tool, making the interaction feel less authentic and hindering rapport-building between the interviewer and participant.

#### *Importance of concrete guidance*

Practical guidance and tools are essential for intermediaries in proxy interviewing, including CoPro interviewing, because they provide the necessary framework and support to conduct effective and meaningful interactions. Intermediaries, such as media professionals who are not professional researchers, often require clear instructions to navigate the complexities of qualitative interviewing. Without this guidance, there is a risk of inconsistency, superficial engagement, or misinterpretation of the participants' perspectives. As [Cammett \(2013\)](#) suggested, concrete guidance is foundational for successful proxy interviews. For example, providing tuition in a workshop before the in-home visits, concept cards, a list with suggestions for photographs, and a template for the digital portrait helps intermediaries understand the critical components that need to be captured, ensuring consistency across different interviews. The guides and templates act as roadmaps, guiding the intermediaries through the interview process and helping them focus on eliciting rich, detailed narratives from participants. In essence, practical guidance and tools empower intermediaries to conduct systematic and empathetic proxy interviews and CoPro interviews. They help bridge the gap between professional researchers and laypersons tasked with data collection, ensuring that the quality of the information gathered is robust and meaningful. Without such support, intermediaries might struggle with uncertainty or lack the confidence to engage deeply in conversations, which could compromise the depth and reliability of the data.

#### *Future research directions and applications*

The need for future studies on CoPro interviewing is evident from the methodological insights and challenges highlighted. Future studies should empirically investigate how intermediaries' skills, training, and positionality influence the quality of data collected in CoPro interviews, for instance, in a comparative study of researcher-conducted interviews and intermediaries-conducted interviews. Understanding how different levels of engagement, resistance, or facilitation styles affect participant responses could help refine training methods. Additionally, strategies must be explored to mitigate biases introduced by the separation between data collection and analysis. Researchers should examine how reliance on summarized representations, such as portraits, affects the authenticity and depth of qualitative findings. While concept cards help structure conversations, their limitations warrant further examination, including the potential to constrain spontaneity and introduce topic bias. Future studies could develop and test alternative tools or methods that strike a balance between structure and flexibility, thereby ensuring richer and more organic interactions. Finally, the method's applicability should be explored beyond media research, particularly in healthcare, political science, and education, where intermediary-facilitated research is beneficial. By addressing these areas, future studies could advance CoPro interviewing as a robust qualitative research method.

Regarding the general applicability of CoPro interviewing, the method is adaptable and has potential for use across diverse research contexts and fields, extending beyond media research.

---

By collaborating with locally embedded intermediaries and structured tools, the method facilitates access to authentic narratives while maintaining methodological rigor. However, the method's broader applicability also requires researchers to address the abovementioned challenges. Researchers are encouraged to adapt the method thoughtfully to their specific contexts, incorporating cultural sensitivities and tailored training.

In conclusion, I want to reiterate that, as a practice, CoPro interviewing aligns with the ongoing "audience turn" in journalism and media studies, where the focus shifts toward understanding audiences' lived experiences and integrating their voices into the production process. The insights gained through CoPro interviewing highlight the importance of concrete guidance, reflexivity, and thoughtful tools like concept cards, underscoring their relevance as a model for participatory approaches. In this way, CoPro interviewing serves as a practical and theoretical foundation for advancing participatory practices that prioritize empathy, authenticity, and the co-creation of knowledge.

---

## References

- Bochner, A. and Ellis, C. (1995), "Telling and living: narrative co-construction and the practices of interpersonal relationships", in Leeds-Hurwitz, W. (Ed.), *Communication as Social Construction: Social Approaches to the Study of Interpersonal Interaction*, Guilford Press, pp. 201-213.
- Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2022), *Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide*, Sage Publications, London.
- Brinkmann, S. and Kvale, S. (2015), *InterViews: Learning the Craft of Qualitative Research Interviewing*, SAGE Publications, London.
- Cammett, M. (2013), "Using proxy interviewing to address sensitive topics", in Mosley, M.E. (Ed.), *Interview Research in Political Science*, Cornell University Press, pp. 125-147.
- Haustein-Teßmer, O. (2024), "Getting started with better listening: a ten-step guide for newsrooms", available at: <https://medium.com/news-innovation-and-leadership-at-the-newmark/getting-started-with-better-listening-a-ten-step-guide-for-newsrooms-bc20d3a9c8e9> (accessed 7 January 2025).
- Heise, N., Loosen, W., Reimer, J. and Schmidt, J.-H. (2014), "Including the audience: comparing the attitudes and expectations of journalists and users towards participation in German TV news journalism", *Journalism Studies*, Vol. 15 No. 4, pp. 411-430.
- Holton, A.E., Lewis, S.C. and Coddington, M. (2020), "Interacting with audiences: journalistic role conceptions, reciprocity, and perceptions about participation", in *The Future of Journalism: Risks, Threats and Opportunities*, Routledge, pp. 327-337.
- Ison, N.L. (2009), "Having their say: email interviews for research data collection with people who have verbal communication impairment", *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, Vol. 12 No. 2, pp. 161-172, doi: [10.1080/13645570902752365](https://doi.org/10.1080/13645570902752365).
- Loosen, W., Reimer, J. and Hölig, S. (2020), "What journalists want and what they ought to do (in) congruences between journalists' role conceptions and audiences' expectations", *Journalism Studies*, Vol. 21 No. 12, pp. 1744-1774, doi: [10.1080/1461670x.2020.1790026](https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670x.2020.1790026).
- Maasø, A., Sundet, V.S. and Syvertsen, T. (2007), "Fordi de fortjener det». Publikumsdeltakelse som strategisk utviklingsområde i mediebransjen", *Norsk medietidsskrift*, Vol. 14 No. 2, pp. 126-154, Årgang, doi: [10.18261/issn0805-9535-2007-02-03](https://doi.org/10.18261/issn0805-9535-2007-02-03).
- Meijer, I. and Costera (2020), "Understanding the audience turn in journalism: from quality discourse to innovation discourse as anchoring practices 1995-2020", *Journalism Studies*, Vol. 21 No. 16, pp. 2326-2342, doi: [10.1080/1461670X.2020.1847681](https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2020.1847681).
- Metykova, M. (2017), "Drifting apart? European journalists and their audiences", *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture*, Vol. 5 No. 2, doi: [10.16997/wpcc.66](https://doi.org/10.16997/wpcc.66).
- Nelson, J. (2021), *Imagined Audiences. How Journalists Perceive and Pursue the Public*, Oxford University Press.
- Patti, C.J. and Ellis, C. (2017), "Co-constructed interviewing", in Matthes, J. (Ed.), *The International Encyclopedia of Communication Research Methods*, Wiley, pp. 1-2.

- 
- Rand, S., Caiels, J., Collins, G. and Forder, J. (2017), "Developing a proxy version of the Adult social care outcome toolkit (ASCOT)", *Health and Quality of Life Outcomes*, Vol. 15 No. 1, p. 108, doi: [10.1186/s12955-017-0682-0](https://doi.org/10.1186/s12955-017-0682-0).
- Schalock, R.L., Brown, I., Brown, R., Cummins, R.A., Felce, D., Matikka, L., Keith, K.D. and Parmenter, T. (2002), "Conceptualization, measurement, and application of quality of life for persons with intellectual disabilities: report of an international panel of experts", *Mental Retardation*, Vol. 40 No. 6, pp. 457-470, doi: [10.1352/0047-6765\(2002\)040<0457:cmaaoq>2.0.co;2](https://doi.org/10.1352/0047-6765(2002)040<0457:cmaaoq>2.0.co;2).
- Shishkin, D. (2022), "The user needs model for news", *Smartoct*, available at: <https://smartocto.com/research/userneeds/> (accessed 5 March).
- Sutton, B. (2011), "Playful cards, serious talk: a qualitative research technique to elicit women's embodied experiences", *Qualitative Research*, Vol. 11 No. 2, pp. 177-196, doi: [10.1177/1468794110394070](https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794110394070).
- Swart, J., Groot Kormelink, T., Costera Meijer, I. and Broersma, M. (2022), "Advancing a radical audience turn in journalism. Fundamental dilemmas for journalism studies", *Digital Journalism*, Vol. 10 No. 1, pp. 8-22, doi: [10.1080/21670811.2021.2024764](https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2021.2024764).

#### **About the author**

Lene Heiselberg, PhD is an Associate Professor at The Centre for Journalism, SDU. She is an audience researcher studying media and journalism reception. Lene has over 10 years of experience as an applied audience researcher focusing on audio and television and was formerly employed at The Danish Broadcasting Corporation. Her tight collaboration with industry partners includes translating study findings into actionable recommendations for professional journalistic practices. Lene Heiselberg can be contacted at: [lhei@journalism.sdu.dk](mailto:lhei@journalism.sdu.dk)