



MEDIA INDUSTRIES, LABOUR AND PRODUCTION

LECTURE 5 – RESEARCHING MEDIA PRODUCTION

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ETHNOGRAPHY AND MEDIA PRODUCTION RESEARCH

- *Not* the ethnographic study of media audiences but of media producers
- Central question: How and why do media texts take the form they do?
- Media production ethnography as intensive research that provides a “causal explanation of the production of certain objects or events” by studying the actual connections between actors (Sayer 1992:143)
- Ethnographic studies of news production
 - “help to reveal the constraints, contingencies and complexities ‘at work’ and, in so doing, provide the means for a more adequate theorization of the operations of the news media and the production of the discourses ‘at play’ within news media representations.” Cottle (2007:2)
- Beginnings in 1970s/1980s, renewed interest since early/mid 2000s but (still) relatively small area of investigation compared to the study of media structures, texts and audiences

INTERVIEW

- Qualitative method: in-depth understanding rather than representative measurement
- Obtain experiences, attitudes, feelings, values, beliefs and opinions
- Scope for participant to elaborate
- Rich source of data: “thick and rich” description (Geertz 1973)
- Allow researchers to understand:
 - what phenomena this represents; and
 - the meaning of that phenomena
- Not about extracting facts but finding *truths* (meanings, explanations)

To gather descriptions of the life-world of the interviewee with respect to interpretation of the meaning of the phenomena. (Kvale, 1983)

To see the research topic from the perspective of the interviewee, and to understand how and why he or she comes to have this particular perspective. (King, 1994)

Interviews are particularly useful for getting the story behind a participant's experiences. (McNamara, 1999)

TYPES OF INTERVIEW

- Structured
 - Pre-determined questions in a set order, no deviation from script (Same questions asked in the same way for all participants)
 - Good for factual information
- Unstructured
 - No set questions, topic determined by interviewee (Facilitate a conversation rather than questioning)
 - Good for meaning, reflection, exploration
- Semi-structured
 - Interview script with main questions or areas of interest, No fixed order of questions. (A guided conversation)
 - Good for factual information and meaning/reflection

THE RESEARCH SUBJECT

Media producers as...

- I. (Exclusive) experts
- II. Self-reflexive interpreters/commentators on reality
- III. Wary of scholarly scrutiny



Implications for

- Access
- Field relations
- Publication

Difficult interviewees

- Uncommunicative
- Over-communicative
- High status
- The would-be interviewer

Implications differ according to industry, public-private structure, genre, and work roles

1) ACCESS

Concerns over implications of disclosure rather than general disinterest:

- Everyone wants to talk about it but not always 'on record'

Reasons for rejection:

- Time/effort
- Confidentiality of business strategies and ideas
- Wary of critical investigation (reputational culture of many industries)
- Or none at all...

No reasons, but media organizations are very suspicious of negative publicity from research

None specifically. They delayed an answer to my request, for three months!!!

Sensitivity of news work

More a matter of people being 'too busy'.

I have been denied access for particular situations where practitioners would have taken some strategic decisions for the programme (I guess and, somehow I had known, financial decisions)."

1) ACCESS

- Parallels between research and (factual) production: Similar...
 - Purpose: Describe and understand specific cultures and the individual's role in society.
 - Processes: Observation, recording and (selected) interpretation and representation of human behaviour.
 - Principles: Originality, objectivity, impartiality, ethics, transparency.
- ...can facilitate and complicate access: on the one hand, sympathetic support and frankness, on the other hand, greater awareness and self-reflexivity may lead to refusal of access

➤ Researcher frustration:

Felt “perhaps a little irritated with a group of people who spent their entire professional lives depending on others giving them access” (Silverstone 1985:200)

It's “ironic that documentary producers who relied on their subjects' willingness to expose aspects of their life to an observer with a camera and recorder were unwilling to expose their own work practices to an observer

1) ACCESS: OBSERVATION OR PARTICIPATION?

- Depends on production setting
- Advantages:
 - Economic “trade” argument
 - Less conspicuous researcher presence
 - Increased access in field



“The ethnography of office work, in which subjects’ primary activities are speaking on the phone and typing on computer keyboards, leaves little room for productive observation without conspicuously disturbing their work. (...) My revised stance as participant *and* observer afforded me a role in the production that made my visits to the office much more purposeful, provided me greater access to information, and resolved what sometimes felt like a duplicitous presentation of self.” (Dornfeld 1998:23)

- Problems: “researcher-effect”, “going native”, time management in the field

1) ACCESS: PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE OR OUTSIDER?

“Professionals do not have the time and opportunity, for the most part, to teach researchers. They will be able to provide information about specific technical matters, work routines, and individual practices, but the researcher must have a high level of specific knowledge ‘going in’.” (Newcomb 1991: 100)

- Advantages:
 - Easier access to conduct the research, as an “insider”
 - Understanding more readily the practices being observed
 - Encouraging greater disclosure from the media professionals whose practices are being examined
 - Increased trust in the researcher not to disclose confidential information

- Problems:

- Risk of “professional blindness” (bias), lack of distance and openness

“The main problems for researchers working within their own societies are reconfiguring culture patterns in familiar situations, and interpreting meanings attached to events.” (Burgess 1984: 24)

2) IN THE FIELD: RELATIONSHIPS

- High levels of awareness of research process and self-reflexivity among media producers but no interest in content/topic of research
- Dismissal of media studies based on assumptions and lack of methodological knowledge
- Potential consequences:
 - Impaired authenticity of participant statements
 - Exclusion / restricted access (hierarchy)
 - Passive resistance (e.g. withholding information)
- Potential responses:
 - Participation in the field
 - Duration of fieldwork
 - Position within organisational hierarchy
 - Multi-method approach and data triangulation

So you are observing us ... we were all worried about it.

Like you, you are listening to us!

Just admit it, you just didn't want to do so much literature work.

So , how is it going? You are writing a report or something.?

Well, I should be a professor then, I've worked in the industry for ten years...

2) IN THE FIELD: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Beginning
2. Grand-tour and mini-tour questions
3. Wording and phrasing questions
 - Avoid bias and leading questions
 - Avoid multiple questions
4. Straightforward wording
5. Follow up
 - Probe (to elaborate) and prompt (to clarify)
 - Paraphrasing
6. Ending the interview

3) PUBLICATION

- Media producers' concerns over confidentiality and reputation may lead to restrictions in publication and even impairment of future research
- Potential responses:
 - Consultation during publication stage
 - Anonymity (not in all cases possible)
 - Trust (professional experience, knowledge)
 - Consideration in design of research question
 - Differences between academia and media production: 'heart rate' and target audience



The “very high heart rate, new products, and changes mark the media industry where competition, strategically sensitive issues , or actions have a relatively short lifespan. Often, what is perceived as sensitive [at the time of data collection], therefore, might well be much less sensitive, or passed, when research results are published. The much slower heart rate, workflow, and publication rates of academic research are in this sense a big advantage” (Bruun 2016:143)

ANALYSING QUALITATIVE DATA

1. Transcription and field notes
2. Read, re-read, listen again, re-read...
3. Look for patterns, repetition, stories, judgements
 - What is being said 'beneath' the stories or repetitions?
 - Use 'stories' as examples
 - Feelings – anger, hate, love, respect
 - Metaphors – what do they mean?
 - Conflict between them and someone else
 - Conflict within themselves – e.g. ethical choices
3.
 - Contradictions
3. Group these patterns or sections of interviews/field notes into themes – colour coding is useful
4. Label these themes into categories
5. Connect themes to arguments and theories from the module
6. Consider implications for theory

CHALLENGES

- Resource heavy:
 - organise, travel, interview, transcribe, analyse = time, effort, money
- Restricted sample size:
 - in-depth understanding rather than representative measurement
- Access to exclusive research sites and subjects
- Researcher effects and “going native”

MEDIA PRODUCTION ETHNOGRAPHY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Need to respond to:

- Funding / time constraints
- Changes in media industries and production: digitalisation, convergence, corporate conglomeration, transnational production and distribution, changing labour structures...

Expansion of media production ethnography towards:

- Multi-sited research
- Multi-national research
- Longitudinal research
- Combine with study of text
- Multi-method approached including use of data collection/monitoring technologies
- Large-scale cross-disciplinary projects
- Lobby for greater transparency and accountability of media organisations

OTHER METHODS

- Discourse analysis of industry publications and trade press (how the industry talks about itself)
- Analysis of production documents (incl. archival research)
- Network analysis
- Biographical interviews
- Survey
- ...

FINAL THOUGHTS

- Ethnography as valuable approach for media production research but further diversification of ethnographic production research is needed
- Characteristics of research subject in question cause challenges for conduct of ethnographic research
- In this context, participation, professional/industry experience and multi-method approach as potentially valuable
 - Does collaboration with producers inherently bias research?
 - How to resolve barriers of time, funding and access?