INDUSTRIAL SOAP OPERAS, FABLES, AND MORALITY TALES: ETHNOGRAPHIC VIDEO AND DESIGN IMPLEMENTATION

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Anthropologists involved in product design and development processes often struggle to explain our findings and gain buy in from the people who either hold the purse strings or must build a tool which reflects an external point of view. Consequently, getting design teams and other members of the business community to listen (and implement) means being able to quickly communicate compelling stories and give easily understood product direction. Video narrative as a tool/process for rapidly conveying overarching patterns to the business community calls for special attention, both because of its potential benefits and its inherent risks. In our media-rich culture, the convention people are most comfortable with for the reporting of human experience is not print, but video and film. This paper discusses the rationale for using video as a principal method of communicating informant narratives and presenting a meaningful overview of our findings. It discusses both the benefits and risks of editing choices and telling a story through video. Finally, it addresses the ramifications of posting anthropological findings on the border between performance and scientific presentation.

Presentation Style

Before addressing the concept of narrative and the use of video, we must look at issues of research presentations in the corporate setting. One of the most difficult problems practitioners face is getting people to read what we put in front of them. The cold, hard reality is that these groups often have little time, little patience for reading, and want information that meets specific, targeted goals. Inevitably, understanding this frequently means abbreviating the content or restructuring so the fine points and ambiguities of the information are simplified, lost, or downplayed for the immediate consumers of the research findings (Gerbner 1988). This does not imply that the conclusions we draw from research must be dramatized or "dumbed down," but rather that we are forced to synthesize and distill the information so it can be readily applied to the needs of the consumers of the data. It means presenting the information in ways that
are easily and readily understood by a wide range of individuals. In other words, we must build understandable, compelling stories. We are interpreters of the complexities of culture, as romantic as it may sound and the traditional tools in our “tool kit” are the pen and paper (or keypad and PC). That being said, the goal is to gain trust and respect from the client and to get them to understand the world as it pertains to the population in question.

The crucial challenge is determining which data are most relevant to the specific tasks of the people to whom you are providing the information, and presenting that information in the simplest, most direct manor (Baba 1986). The engineer designing the mechanics of a product does not need to know everything that may come from the research; he or she needs to know the information relevant to building a tool that will function appropriately and cause a minimal amount of stress to the population using it. Simply put, we must decide what story to tell and tailor it so that it will find use, knowing that the majority of what we have seen, heard, digested and believe will never see the light of day. And in determining the story, we must consider how to get people engaged enough to crack the written report and/or acknowledge the relevance and applicability of anthropological data.

Appreciably simplified data are used primarily to get implementation and funding, and to draw attention to issues that might be considered external to the business. Bullet points and synopses are meant as overviews, rather than the schema by which products are designed and built. The same can be said for a piece of video. It is our responsibility to use synopsized information to compel the audience to delve into the deeper, richer material. The synopses and videos we construct must make it clear that they are abbreviations and require more commitment on the part of those watching or reading the presented materials. More importantly, the presented materials must work to inspire the audience enough to care and learn more about the material and the subjects enough to learn more.

Nine times out of ten the reader is looking for information that is quite literal and blatantly instructional. Ambiguity and/or involved anecdotal descriptions are usually rejected in favor of what is more concrete. One of the principal benefits to ethnographic research is, after all, the richness of detail and the experience-near nature of the
information and writing (Jordan 1994). The struggle is how to provide this experience-near information. Presenting narrative, particularly via the film medium, conveys the impact of the experience-near information, engaging multiple senses.

It means compressing information into a fairly uniform structure, such that each “theme” is easily identifiable within moments (be it from video or a sequence of bullet points). Because specific recommendations are preferred over implications, these must be presented to the audience in usable ways; putting a human face on the web of culture is essential to getting the audience to pay attention to the total experience and not a subsection thereof. While the tendency diminishes with time, the first response to data is to ask for a tool with which to make decisions.

**Participant Narrative, the Anthropologist, and Business**

Narrative, as it is used here, is analysis of a chronologically told story with a focus on how elements are sequenced. It attempts to understand why some elements are evaluated differently from others, how the past shapes perceptions of the present, how the present shapes perceptions of the past, and how both shape perceptions of the future. The narrative process enables these participants to reconstruct experiences, meaning, and patterns of tool use according to the cultural patterns attributable to the underlying theme. Transformation can occur privately or when social groups indirectly or critically reflect on the conditions that constrain their actions and understanding of events.

The narrative process collects data to describe lives in, ideally, a collaborative atmosphere, giving the participant a direct voice while attempting to present an analytical and interpretive layer from the perspective of the researcher. In analyzing narratives, the researcher works to actively give voice to the participant in a particular time, place or setting and provide a description of experiences based upon his or her recollections and statements about past feelings and perspectives.

The narrative approach provides the researcher with an organizational structure designed to be responsive to analysis (Bruner 1986). The resulting analysis moves towards a reduction of the narration to answer the question "what is the point of this story?" In turn, this information is distilled into determinations of relevance to the various audiences according to business and design needs.
As each narrative unfolds, it is contextualized by the purposes of the interviewer in terms of the research and of the participant in terms of self-presentation. The story may not represent reality from an external perspective, but is an attempt on the part of the teller to reduce information into something meaningful for the outsider. In turn, the researcher serves a conduit for the final audience, adding an editorial and interpretive overlay. This representation is meant to convince the listeners of its trustworthiness, relevance, and association to more expansive concerns and events.

The use of a narrative inquiry and the development of case stories offer multiple perspectives in understanding a practice, social group, etc. This process gives meaning to the audiences; it yields history, meaning, myth and function. The recounted experience is central to the development of a social and personal identity (Mischler 1995). It also uses the form of a story-map to present a meaningful cross-case comparison. The patterns of a participant's self identity, their culture and community, and any transformations that take place over time are represented by the participant in the telling of his or her story.

No single story provides a full understanding of the meaning of an event, activity, etc., but it provides pieces for a total picture of a concept. Repeated patterns of behavior and repeated storylines are important to understand the total concept, shed light on the participant's cultural consciousness, and elucidate the interrelationships between collective and individual experience.

A narrative is developed or constructed in the telling. The role of interviewer, of course, affects the stories as we ask for clarification or elaboration in that it is impacted by when and how we ask questions. In telling their stories, participants reveal themselves according to the social frame they believe fits the researcher/participant relationship. Consequently, the process is unavoidably a shared narrative construction and reconstruction. When examining the veracity of the participant's account, there is the possibility that the participant will tell you what he or she thinks you want to hear. However, the participant is also compelled to draw on components of the story he or she believes are relevant to the historical and current situations in question, then piece them together in a meaningful and coherent way. Corrections, deviations, etc. occur and shed light on significant issues.

A life as led is inseparable from a life as told; a life is not “how it was” but how it is
interpreted and reinterpreted, told and retold. Certain basic formal properties of the life
do not change easily (Rosenwald and Ochberg 1992). The narrative process, then,
reveals a participant’s essential form of self-organization, even when that organization
seems chaotic. In fact, this self-organization seems relatively immune to change
(Rosenwald and Ochberg 1992).

Narrative is a particular mode of thinking, the mode that relates to the concrete and
particular as opposed to the abstract and general; narrative creates and transmits cultural
traditions and builds the values and beliefs that define cultural identities. Narrative is a
repository of practical knowledge. Narrative is a mold in which we shape and preserve
memories.

While descriptive observations such as these work well to qualify and explain
narrative in a poetic manner, definitional approaches tend to provide conflicting views of
the nature of narrative, since scholars will single out different features as constitutive of
the nature of narrative. The following dilemmas illustrate some of the more contentious
points.

First, does narrative vary according to culture and historical period, or do the
fundamental conditions of narrativity constitute cognitive universals? That narrative was
slow to emerge as a theoretical concept, and typically enjoys recognition largely within
academic culture, seems to speak in favor of a relativistic approach, but the culture-
specific feature could be the awareness of the concept, rather than the properties that
define it (Bruner 1986). The relativistic approach raises the problem of comparability: if
narrative takes radically different forms in every culture, where is the common
denominator that justifies the labeling of these forms as narrative? If one opts for the
culture-universal approach, the obvious differences between the narratives of different
periods and cultures are a matter of thematic filling in and of variations on a common
basic structure.

Second, does narrative presuppose a verbal act of narration by a narrator, or can a
story be told without the mediation of a narratorial consciousness? What is at stake in this
question is whether dramatic media or media that does not use language alone as their
primary mode of representation are capable of narration. My position is that film
narration does not necessarily require a narratorial figure. Some scholars have attempted
to reconcile the narrator-based definition with the possibility of non-verbal narration by analyzing drama and movie as presupposing the utterance of a narratorial figure, even when the film or the play does not make use of voice-over narration (Toolan 2001).

Both of these issues hold significance in large part because they impact how we construct and distribute a narrative piece to the client audience(s). Additionally, these issues impact how the final report or video is understood. Is the intended message conveyed? Is there a necessary conflict between what in differing contexts might be labeled “science” and “drama”? If the piece is understood as science or art, what value do the audiences place on both of these concepts? The overarching issue at hand is less about determining what constitutes ownership of the narrative voice than it is about whether or not we, the anthropologists in the field, are able to successfully convey meaning that results in some degree of change or understanding. All ethnographers make use of narrative conventions when communicating the presumed results of our fieldwork, whether that method of communication is a piece of video or a monograph. The authorial voice is ever present. It’s simply a matter of how loudly we wish it to be heard in the telling of someone else’s story.

**Video and the Stories WE Tell**

Video has been used for many years to analyze and report data, but has frequently taken a back seat to the lengthy, written qualitative or statistical report. If we are to see our research implemented and more extensive research employed, then video should take center stage. Video transforms how our findings are viewed and implemented. Our clients don’t read anthropology journals, they often don’t even read the editorial page – they watch TV. When they do read, they scan.

Of course, video ethnography has some obvious advantages and disadvantages. While unethical editing can easily skew data and partially control the transferred “reality” of events, primary experience with research participants on video can be far more persuasive than summarized bullet points. Unlike a paper transcript, video conveys emotions such as anger, disappointment, uncertainty, and enthusiasm clearly. Captivate in the beginning and they will be considerably more likely to turn their attention to the final text. Additionally, video gives direct examples from which designers, developers,
and executives can conceptually grasp and use to build strategies and tools. Obviously, we never want our video summary to turn exclusively into entertainment, or our attempts to create a compelling presentation of findings to overshadow the findings themselves. If the screening of our mini-documentaries and dramas helps push a development group or a strategy in a more user-informed direction, then that’s a good thing.

It is not uncommon for a researcher using film in data collection to run into people concerned, rightfully, with the validity of the method. Sometimes the concerns revolve around whether film and video are art, science, or something distinct but only vaguely defined (Altheide 1996). Because of its interpretive, creative, impressionistic, and emotional attributes, video (and art for that matter) is sometimes assumed to be in direct conflict with an objective, value-free “science”, apparently creating an unavoidable conflict between the goals of film as art and anthropological user research as science (Hockings 1995). Consequently, people, academics and professionals alike, frequently assume limited possibilities for film. The status of film as a serious analytical resource has remained fairly marginal, particularly when the focus is to present information in a narrative structure.

Film is sometimes seen as a humanistic pastime, not significant scientific work. It is meant to appeal to the audience’s emotional pliability. Ultimately, the producer of the final visual document is seen as selectively building subjectively constituted data and constructing a piece that reflects his/her interpretation rather than “the facts” (MacDougall 1997). However, the same can be said for any written document, particularly when behavioral research methods are applied to data collection for a specific task or client need. The impact is wide reaching; a logo-centric culture perpetuates a compartmentalizing and hierarchizing of sources of ethnographic knowledge, which prevents researchers from benefiting from the full breadth of insight and information available. Slide decks and written reports often have pictures, and films often use verbal narratives, subtitles or intertitles, and have accompanying written material, in the shape of film-makers' notes, contemporary ethnographies, study guides, or internally produced handouts and bibliographies (Ruby 1975). The reality is that while the film-focused researcher does indeed run the risk of compromising the complex realities of a particular
behavior or series of behaviors, the risk is no greater than that of the researcher relying primarily on the written word.

In any of the afore mentioned cases, the researcher frequently takes on the role of omnipotent, unseen author and expert. The text, sound clip, or video narrative is filtered through his or her eyes; eyes that are, if trained properly in the tenets of the anthropological discipline, self-reflexive and committed to the honest and ethical treatment of the information gathered. And in this lie the subtle politics of power and the subject/researcher relationship. Our words alone, for right or wrong, frequently lack credibility in the minds of business executives and designers who are intent on validating their work or personal views. What we have to say can be ignored in the light of “common sense” experience held by the business and design teams. Conversely, while the statements of participants have credibility, their thoughts are often seen as disjointed, irrelevant, or dismissible as singular anecdotal moments. By constructing stories, both parties (researcher and participant) gain credibility and influence. The narrator/editor gains the status of author and guide, moving from being perceived as irrelevant to the business situation to a position of authority. The participant is given greater significance in that he or she is understood as representational of a wider range of meaning, cultural patterns, and behavior (MacDougall 1997). The participant or participants used in a final video convey a coherent message that can, when the “story” is told well by the author/editor, be implemented by members of the audience. Video serves to provide specific direction while enticing the audience to tread into deeper waters, thus sparking greater innovation.

For some, manipulation of the footage (editing or altering of footage, etc.) destroys its “scientific value.” The model is that teams enter the field and film material, the scientist studies the footage, and the filmmaker transforms it into art. In actuality, this scenario is never realized. The footage is indeed dissected and analyzed by the researcher, typically transformed into a product the client will readily consume, but by its very nature qualitative research always has a degree of subjectivity. In fact, any and all research involves degrees of subjectivity and personal biasing. This hardly invalidates the work or the means by which data are captured and displayed. Validity and reliability are not necessarily one and the same (see Kirk and Miller 1986).
In fact, the film or video editor often assumes the role of informational gatekeeper, determining how best to bridge two worlds – that of consumer and that of the business. This is precisely the role of the editor in many documentary film productions. The editor’s job is to ensure that the video is dynamic and concise enough to engage the audience(s) while conveying the most important information (Altheide 1996). There are times when the researcher’s goal is to invoke an explosive, powerful, emotional reaction from the audience. And this brings us to the heart of the matter – is it really imperative to distinguish art from science? There is no question that pieces of information may be lost in more dramatic renderings of information, but it is a question of relevance to the business concerns. The alternative of a video being ignored or a report sitting unused because the basic issues could not hold the viewer’s attention may conceivably outweigh this fact. It is a reality of conducting research for industry.

In the documentary format, the researcher typically fades into the background as much as possible, surfacing as the third-party eyewitness. We are unseen and all knowing, appearing only to make clarifying remarks as narrator. While this is certainly an appropriate convention, it is by no means the only path for us to walk down.

In conducting fieldwork, we as anthropologists are asked to share the concrete experiences of the participants’ environment, shared behavior, language, social relations, etc. In sharing that rich and complex world, new ideas and deeper understanding emerge on the part of the client. We as the experts see, hear, write, and film what are the most important aspects of the field experience and distill them into something that can be used by the various members of the business, development, and design teams. And because video is such a potentially influential tool, showing the drama of daily life, the dramatic and artistic side of the story can create waves in the business community that the traditional, omnipotent style of presentation cannot. Presentation styles, choices of material and stories, lighting, viewing angles, organization, etc. all work to structure the portrayal of a culture or population in ways particular to the ethnographer or team of ethnographers and in ways the client can relate to. There is an inherent story-like character to all ethnographic accounts of the field. This is doubly so when research is presented in the video format because of limitations of the lens and the limited timeframe of most cinematic pieces; the convention of film is to present information to an array of
senses in a relatively short amount of time. This does not imply that the videos we create are fictions or that the goal is simply to dazzle the audience. It simply means that ignoring the story-like nature of the video results in dry, dull work that does little to impact the attitudes, expectations, and development directions of our clients.

The goal is ultimately to shake the client’s foundations of belief, to rattle his or her assumptions, to create a new state a awareness. It serves to evoke a participatory feeling in the viewers and bring them into the moment of experience, compelling them to consider new ways of classifying and thinking about their world, as well as their processes.

As with the impressionist tale (see VanMaanen 1988), the story is recounted including all the “odds and ends that are associated with remembered events.” The audience is drawn into the story created both by the author/editor and participant(s). They hear, feel, see what the researcher experienced – the audience is meant to relive the experience, insofar as that is possible, rather than interpret it. The problems, issues, and meanings have largely been worked through in the background by the ethnographer and the story being told is meant to draw in the audience and build a collaborative solution to design and business issues. The emotional impact of seeing and hearing such lush descriptions and events sparks interest, forcing the audience to more openly engage with the researcher, the research, and other members of the development team.

Ultimately, this means that the researcher/film maker applies conventions of art as readily as he or she does those of science. Tension must build, foreshadowing must occur, contextual details must be condensed without losing their power, and the story must have a logical flow as with a written piece. Details and subtleties are set aside or given greater attention in regards to how they impact the audience’s ability to engage with and grasp a topic. The overarching issues are how well the story hangs together, how easy is it to extract information (or inspire the viewer to read the larger report), and how believable the material is. The issues by which the final material is judged are derived from cinematic and literary worlds as much as they are from the anthropological discipline.

The power of the emotionally influential, dramatic story in the beginning of the design process can mean the difference between seeing innovation and the dismissal of
our research. The story serves as a launching pad for teams attempting to turn qualitative data into something concrete that can in turn be productized or turned into a viable business model. Bore them and there is almost no chance of affecting change. Citing Van Maanen (1988):

"Selective packaging of field data to exemplify generalized constructs is a standard practice, even though the precise empirical situations in which the field data are developed are perhaps far less coherent or obvious than the concepts they serve to illustrate."

This is doubly so when addressing the needs of business and design teams with distinct, targeted problems and limited time. Our editorial and stylistic choices make points clear in what might otherwise be murky waters.

Of course, it is certainly possible that less than ideal development and design occur due to mistakes of interpretation, both on the part of the researcher and the audience (see Rosaldo 1989). However, businesses are frequently concerned less with perfection than they are with getting a product to market. If done well, it is unlikely that the story told will result in disastrous business models or product designs. In the end, the fieldworker must decide whether the risk outweighs the possibility of having the entire piece of research dismissed because he or she failed to engage the audience. The final decisions as to which stories to tell and how to tell them falls to the ethnographer's ability to understand the audiences for whom the video will played.

Conclusions

If researchers are supposed to make films intelligible to client audiences, they must learn what common sense, such as it is, dictates as constituting a good film. That is, they should emulate the aesthetic conventions of documentary realism or come to grips with their artistic nature and the needs and expectations of their audiences. The researcher must determine the tale to tell and how to tell it. Pieces of the puzzle are, of course, missing from any video, but the most important themes and primary informational pieces remain for consumption by a wide range of viewers. Regardless of stylistic forms, the pieces selected for a final edit do indeed play to the emotions of the
client, but without that emotional impact clients are likely to forego the deeper issues entirely. Film and video can be used to access a level of emotional response and personal identification or conflict which is difficult within the lexical constraints of writing. We have come to live in a fast-paced, video-centric world. In turn, these responses provide something tangible from which the designer, business person, etc. can build new ideas. In other words, the narrative constructed by the researcher works to provide actionable information that can be translated by the designer, business strategist, etc. into something tangible. By a series of movements in a sequence, films can communicate in concrete terms what in written words would be more detailed but less succinct.
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