

## Film and Video in Qualitative Research

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The twentieth century was the century of film; the twenty first will be the century of digital video. The twentieth saw major innovations in recording and filmmaking, many applicable to ethnography. But owing to characteristics of the technology itself, visual approaches never became a prominent feature of the qualitative research arsenal. A methodology may be viewed as the application of a technology to some feature of the world, producing the traces that serve as a basis for analysis. Current video technology offers a spectacular methodological promise, making it first choice for ethnographers of the future.

After a brief history of film in anthropology, we examine several features of video for qualitative research, that is, *audiovisual ethnography*. We discuss the importance of technology, the distinction between data collection and presentation, the concepts of the videographic context and fluid wall, and the critique of photography.

Nanook of the North, produced in 1922 by Robert Flaherty, is often considered the first ethnographic film. Flaherty openly staged some scenes in the movie, which worried few and entertained many. Russian Dziga Vertov, a contemporary of Flaherty's, is credited with developing a realistic film style that came to be known as 'cinema-verite' (filmic truth). Anthropologist Margaret Mead, collaborating with Gregory Bateson during the mid century, was highly influential in the development of visual approaches to ethnography. Today students and scholars are quick to appreciate her idea that notepad and pencils are not enough, and film cameras are important field technologies. While survey methods and quantitative analysis dominated much of the mid to late century, the means and technical capabilities of present day scholars, combined with the massive technical changes that have occurred in the past 40 years, have seen a resurgence of visual methods. Ethnographic film theory by the 1980s re-evaluated the reflexivity of the filmmaker and emphasized another form of realism: avoiding close-ups and using only synchronous sound with minimal editing.

While technology does not determine social practice, it provides opportunities and sets constraints. Film was an expensive medium. Cameras were large and difficult to control. Data collection could not readily be accomplished by a lone ethnographer. It could even be argued that film was not used, in any serious sense, to "collect data" but only to provide a record of interesting social practices and rare or disappearing cultures. What occurred during the 1980s and 1990s were technological innovations that resulted in three new characteristics of relevance for qualitative research. First, the basic recording devices became user friendly. The gear needed for producing audiovisual recordings of extremely high quality became smaller, lighter, less expensive, and easy to use. Driven by tourists, parents, and ordinary people, manufacturers invested significant resources in

innovation that resulted, unintentionally, in the best means of collecting and presenting data on social life that professional observers now have at their disposal.

Second, analogue media degrade, if only a little, with each copy, but digital audiovisual records may be reproduced in perpetuity with no loss. Whether captured directly to a hard drive, tape, or mini-DVD, audio and images may be viewed, edited, and copied without degradation, facilitating the sharing of data and results among qualitative researchers. Nonlinear editing systems are the third crucial advance for digital ethnographic research. New generations of ethnographers need not worry about the cumbersome and destructive editing systems used by the editors of anthropological films. Just as statistical software systems have no effect on the original data files in which survey data are stored, pointers or references to captured media have no impact on the original audiovisual data that record social life in process.

Collection of audiovisual data must be clearly distinguished from their use in various presentational settings. For data collection, digital recordings are just as useful for standard quantitative purposes (using images to systematically code cases and variables) as they are for qualitative analysis of actors and events. Drive by footage has been employed to test “broken windows” crime theories; fixed cameras to examine cultural accounts of “ritual disrobement.” A second use of video data is as a response platform, when video is employed as a stimulus for informants in the context of conventional interviews.

However, the standard use of digital video is for the simple record of social life it provides. Interacting with participants in the presence of recording devices provides a videoactive context for research. The familiarity of most people with video technology quickly makes the camera an actor in the research process, a subject of commentary and focus of action. It is not difficult for informants to neglect its presence, yet observation occurs in both directions. Sometimes it is useful to let subjects become operators themselves. The fluid wall created by a camera is an opportunity and not a hindrance so long as the researcher is willing to switch between the four main types of record: standard audio/video, audio only, field notes, and memory.

It is important to emphasize that what is crucial for qualitative research is high quality sound rather than video. The audio component of data collection must be first priority for the ethnographer since poor video practice does not undermine analysis and presentation as seriously as poor audio. The ethnographer must be intensely conscious of collecting sounds, the sound of silence as well as the hums and pops of modern life. While the radically micro approach to social life demands an attention to sound that macro approaches do not, the latter still requires capture of the strange beauty of human conversation. Video ethnography excels in the capture of events, the interactions of dyads, small groups, public meetings, and crowds.

The presentation of data is one of the key differences between audiovisual and other forms of qualitative methods. Text-based forms of output (books and articles) have dominated social research since its inception, but lectures and professional meetings have

long relied on a combination of talk, graphs, and pictures to build a case. Nonlinear editing systems such as Final Cut Pro enable the scholar to capture data, to build sequences clip by clip through the setting of In and Out points in a data file with three tracks (one video and two audio), adding voiceovers. Two formats of presentation are possible. One is a complete movie, with titles and credits. The other is production of a clip sequence that allows for starting, stopping, and reviewing in real time. The use and consumption of video by non-scholars renders both formats instantly and endlessly accessible.

One of the key advantages, indicated above, is that widespread exposure to alternative shooting styles (e.g., reality television) have immunized audiences to shaky camera work and framing that would have been unacceptable in an era where Hollywood productions dominated visual thinking. An unintended, but highly desirable consequence of audiovisual presentations is based on the constraint that while you can speak about anything you like, the only thing that can be shown to your audience is, quite simply, what you have filmed. You cannot luxuriate in the abstractions of social theory for long without returning to the real world of social interactions. Videographers know that this facilitates a focus on first order questions, questions of interest to real people and not just specialists.

A consequence of the size and user friendliness of modern camcorders is to cast serious doubt on the future use of still photography and tape recorders for qualitative research. Apart from their use as a stimulus for respondents, there would appear to be no ordinary research encounters where photographs would be desirable or where still cameras or tape recorders would be an advantage over digital camcorders. A typical camcorder captures audio of equal or higher quality than most tape recorders, and the lens cap can readily be used where respondents prefer audio only. Standard DV-NTSC format records nearly 30 frames per second, any of which can be freeze framed if a still shot is later desired. There is no real world research situation where the size difference between a still camera and a video camera would make the former preferable over the later, and nearly all would agree that collecting more data (digital video) is better than collecting less (still photographs). But the crucial consideration is an approach to the social world: audiovisual ethnography is committed to the position that an understanding of social life occurs through an examination of the processes that comprise social interactions. A still photograph is a moment in time, insufficient for qualitative research.

In closing it is important to distinguish between scholarly uses of video and documentary uses. While some academic movies might be indistinguishable from documentaries, there are important differences in audience, in emphasis, and, particularly, in the time frame. A documentary that requires several years to make, responds to issues in the research literature, is produced for presentations at meetings and classrooms, and provided without charge on the Internet is indistinguishable from the academic movies that will characterize qualitative research products in the twenty first century.

*Further Reading*

- Pink, Sarah. 2001. Doing Visual Ethnography: Images, Media, and Representation in Research. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- Shrum, Wesley, Ricardo Duque, and Timothy Brown. 2005. "Digital Video as Research Practice: Methodology for the New Millennium." Journal of Research Practice 1(1): M4.
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