Digitally Democratizing the New Ethnographic Endeavour: Getting Thicker Around the Geertz?

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Abstract: At the intersection of the unfolding of the seventh, eighth and ninth moments of qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2006) and the development of new forms of information and communication technologies lies a powerful possibility for the application of more democratic and authentic forms of ethnographic research and representational work. For those who embrace the emancipatory potential of the ‘new ethnographies’ (Goodall, 2000) inclusivity, authenticity and decolonialist practice emerge as markers of rigour in qualitative research. Digital technologies provide a mechanism to this end by strengthening the data-collection part of the ethnographic process while at the same time opening up rich and evocative means for the presentation and distribution of research outcomes. The first section of this paper looks at the use of a number of new forms of digital technologies—specifically the mobile phone, iPod and digital camera—in ethnographic research work and explores how the forms of data made accessible by these are able to significantly enhance the ‘thickness’ of ethnographic description (Geertz, 1973). In the second part of this paper, we explore the major contribution new digital forms of technology potentially make to the democratizing and de-colonising of the ethnographic process. In particular, we elucidate the effect of authentic research participant engagement in the research endeavour through the use of commonplace digital tools.

Keywords: Ethnography, Qualitative Research, “Thick” Description, De-colonial Research Practice, Democratic Research, Digital Technologies, Research Participants

Introduction

THE PAST DECADE has seen a progressive increase in the use made of visual forms of data in research work generally and a commensurate rise in the popularity of its use in the representation of the outcomes of such research. While the power of the visual image has been a commonplace part of the methodological literature for the past century or longer (The documentary photographic tradition has recorded urban life for almost two centuries, Suchar, 2004, p163), the advent and rapid sophistication of digital photographic and video hardware and editing and analytical software in more recent times has only seen these trends intensify.

In this paper, we outline some of the possibilities for the strengthening of the ethnographic research process through a more deliberate and rigorous application of audio-visual techniques, particularly as such application might contribute to meeting the challenges of the eighth and ninth moments of qualitative research (Denzin and Lincoln 2005). As such, the paper consists of two distinct parts: one, an exposition of particular uses of audio-visual research; the second a largely conjectural piece looking at possible futures for this type of research. In this endeavor, we are concerned to both respond to and to further the call issued by Clifford Geertz to thicken the descriptive and analytical components of ethnographic work.

Geertz & Thick Description

Perhaps one of the defining moments in contemporary conceptualising of the anthropological process occurred in 1973 when Clifford Geertz introduced and effectively naturalised the idea of “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) as the sine qua non of anthropological activity - ethnography - considered as a form of knowledge.

Acknowledging philosopher Gilbert Ryle as the originator of the term, Geertz argued that the detached observationally-based methodologies that underpinned much of the existing (so-called) Western ethnographic corpus could not genuinely lead to any authentic level of knowledge about the thing or people purportedly under scrutiny. The ‘old ethnography’ had held central the imperative of the clinical detachment of the skilled anthropological scientist, able to live a disinterested existence within the cultural context of her or his fieldwork site and derive understandings almost exclusively from watching, supposedly exerting a neutral influence upon the field in view.

At best, said Ryle, such contextually quarantined observation could attempt to account only for the bottom layer of the many-layered sandwich (Ryle
that constituted an appropriately thick description of an event, behavior, or culture. Ryle’s best known example of the explanatory problems of thin (observational) description is based around the example of winks and twitches, but another example of interpretive uncertainties left untouched by thin description follows:

You hear someone come out with ‘Today is the 3rd of February’. What was he doing? Obviously the thinnest possible description of what he was doing is, what would fit a gramophone equally well, that he was launching this sequence of syllables into the air. A tape-recording would reproduce just what he was doing, in this thinnest sense of ‘doing’. But we naturally and probably correctly give a thicker description than this. We say that he was telling someone else the date. He was trying to impart a piece of wanted calendar-information... There are, of course, alternative possible thick descriptions of what the utterer of the noises might have been trying to do. For he might have been lying, i.e. trying to get his enemy to accept a piece of misinformation; or he might have been an actor on the stage, playing the hero’s part of a calendar-informant or the villain’s part of a deliberate calendar-misinformant ... Or he may be trying to render into English a German sentence conveying correct or incorrect calendar-information. If so, the translator is not telling anyone the date, right or wrong. Under none of these alternative thick descriptions is what he is doing just voicing some syllables. (Ryle 1968)

If Geertz drew upon the notion of thick(ening) description in his project to exhort ethnographers to engage in a more engaged form of professional activity, one that would generate significantly greater confidence in the interpretive work of the anthropologist and yield a richer understanding and appreciation of the ethnographic Subject, then more contemporary circumstances have generated similar urgencies for the development of research methodologies and techniques that will produce even more more complexly-layered and multi-perspectival corpuses of evidence and description. Such contemporary circumstances have led Denzin and Lincoln (2005) to describe what they see as the emerging future of qualitative research: their eighth and ninth moments.

The reader is referred to the third edition of the Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005, particularly pp 1-32 and 1115-1126) for further details. For our purposes here, it is necessary to summarily refer to the defining features of the current - seventh - moment and those of the emerging eighth and ninth moments relevant to the purposes of this paper.

The Seventh Moment is characterized by methodological and other conflicts, both within and external to the realm of new qualitative research. This is the time of the...

The appearances of new sensibilities, times when qualitative researchers become aware of issues they had not imagined before. They are the “aha” moments, the epiphanies, much like the “click” moments so deliciously recounted 30 years ago in the pages of Ms. Mag a zine by women coming to consciousness (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p1116). While presenting as essentially a moment of retreat and constraint, this period has thrown up an intense desire of a growing number of people to explore the multiple unexplored places of a global society in transition (p 1116). The tension between serious attempts to rein in the headstrong development of new research practices and the curiosity and optimism of those who see whole new vista of inquiry and voice opening up to them has largely underpinned this period of seeming chaos.

Out of this period is emerging the Eighth Moment, still one of methodological contestation, but one
when an increasingly rapid development of the complexity and sophistication of methodological approaches will proceed to provide opportunities for ever-widening spaces of inquiry and understanding to be opened to the socially-critical gaze. Four major issues will shape the conduct and development of research in this period: the connection between social science and social betterment (“reconnection of social science to social purpose”); the increasing visibility and legitimacy of indigenous modes of inquiry (“the rise of indigenous social science(s)”); the increasing diversification (“decolonization”) of the university academic faculty; and a reinvigorated sense of the importance of “Western” researchers studying their own settings (“returning home”).

In the Ninth Moment, “a fractured future”, research methods and their proponents and adherents will fall into two main camps:

Randomized field trials, touted as the ‘gold standard’ of scientific educational research, will occupy the time of one group of researchers while the pursuit of a socially and culturally responsive, communitarian, justice-oriented set of studies will consume the meaning of ful working moments of the other (Denzin and Lincoln 2005 p 1123).

It comes down, it seems to us, to the challenge issued by Tom Robinson: “You’d better decide which side you’re on” (1978). While not necessarily accepting the full implications and certainty of such a teleologically-determined future, we do share Denzin and Lincoln’s concern over the outcome of this contestation.

We see our work in research to be on all fours with the second of the positions or camps identified in the quote above: the point or purpose of our work has been to contribute to the realisation of a more just community, and we are always cognizant of the potential - however unintentional - of our own complicity in perpetuating and sustaining structures of inequality and exploitation. As such, we view the availability of new digital technologies with considerable interest, particularly insofar as the possibility of enlarging the number of voices able to be incorporated into a project and its reporting are concerned.

The Project Examples

Over many years, our research work has led us to incorporate various elements of (audio)visual evidence into our academic publications, but of late we have become acutely aware of the possibilities for more democratic and authentic research activity digitally-based research activity houses. In this paper, we provide examples of the applications of digital technologies within some of our research projects and then proceed to engage in conjecture as to the catalytic role such technologies might play in what Denzin and Lincoln (2005) term the eighth and ninth moments of qualitative research. In this, we draw on our work in four separate projects conducted over the past 11 years.

Exploring whiteness (1997-2001)

In this study - the doctoral work of one of the authors (Austin) - participants were asked to capture images of what for them summed up white racial/ethnic identity. The images were used primarily for photoelicitation sessions (see Harper 2002) and to enhance learning conversations (Thomas & Harri-Augstein 1985). According to prominent visual research scholar Doug Harper, photo-elicitation is

the simple idea of inserting a photograph into a research interview. The difference between interviews using images and text, and interviews using words alone lies in the ways we respond to these two forms of symbolic representation. This has a physical basis: the parts of the brain that process visual information are evolutionarily older than the parts that process verbal information. Thus images evoke deeper elements of human consciousness that do words; exchanges based on words alone utilize less of the brain’s capacity than do exchanges in which the brain is processing images as well as words. These may be some of the reasons the photo elicitation interview seems like not simply an interview process that elicits more informa-
In explaining the significance of Image 1 (above), Sharon (the participant-photographer) drew upon her life history of holidays in Vanuatu every school holiday from the age of 12 to help her uncle with his scuba diving business. During her time in Vanuatu, she would rarely wear closed shoes, and her selection of this image was to use the tan lines on her feet and those of some of her friends to evoke her emerging conceptualisation of whiteness as deeply embedded, regardless of surface skin color and other phenotypical characteristics. Other participant-photographers similarly produced images of whiteness that captured and portrayed their experiences of white racial identity, location and, at times, privilege. Participant-photographers in this project used film (ie non-digital) cameras, and the images they produced exhibited more of the characteristics of formal, staged photographic work. We gained the impression that the staging of the scene was as crucial as was the techniques of production. While such staging meant the participants were likely to have invested considerable time and thought into the conceptualization of the scene - and, presumably, drawing upon their more deeply held thoughts of what whiteness meant to them - the images are far more impressionistic than representative of episodes and events in their daily lives as white people. As such, this use of the photographic fits closely with what Suchar (2004) calls the shooting script: lists of conceptually grounded or theoretically grounded questions about a particular subject to which the photographs will provide potential answers (p.150)


In this second project, we adopted something of the approach of the flaneur (see Tester, 1994). In her essay, *On Photography*, Susan Sontag describes how, since the development of hand-held cameras in the early 20th century, the camera has become the tool of the flâneur. We looked for aspects of our community that, to us, carried expressions of difference, dominance and Otherness. We utilised digital cameras for the first time in our research and the resultant data set was considerably larger than we had anticipated. One set in particular, those of a Muslim prayer room, was able to give us our initial insight into how the complexity of visual data might be drawn upon and harnessed for more densely analytical work, and how the visual conveys a different type of information from the merely textual\(^1\). The use of the digital camera led to a more spontaneous image-production process, and certainly encouraged the capturing of multiple images and to us indulging our curiosities more readily. Image 2 is one of the images collected from our flaneuristic strolls around sections of the city and led to the compilation of an image profile of the ways in which racial/ethnic Otherness was represented and conveyed in a regional Australian city.

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\(^1\) Some of these photographic images can be accessed at http://gallery.mac.com/austinjon#100008&view=carouseljs&sel=0

Image 2: Posting Intolerance
One of our genuinely image-intense pieces of research work has been the doctoral project of the second of the authors (Hickey) and has involved the use of images as both primary data (i.e., the raw material for analysis) and as elicitation provocation material. The study, based in Henry Giroux’s idea of public pedagogies (Giroux 2003), explores the ways in which particular forms of cultural artifact production—in this case, advertising billboards—are drawn into the construction of public representations of community identities. In this study, successive advertising campaigns conducted largely on very large advertising billboards by the land developer involved in the creation of new ‘edge city’ (Garreau 1991) have been captured digitally and added to a research library of images from multiple sources (newspapers, community newsletters, land corporation mailouts and the like). The images have been loaded on to an iPod and used with community members as elicitation devices in order to secure audience responses to implicit and explicit meanings conveyed by the images. The use of the iPod as a research tool (see Image 4) is another example of the ways in which digital technologies have broadened the scope and the ease of data collection in \textit{in situ} research work. The transportability of the iPod, its high quality color resolution and its everyday nature has allowed a wide range of community members to be drawn into the project, with the elicitation material coming to meet the participants wherever they might be, rather than at pre-arranged times and places. Many of the response interviews have been conducted as a result of serendipitous meetings between the researcher and the participants as the latter have been going about their daily lives—walking in a park or along a lakeside boardwalk, for example. The advantage of this for the type of research in which we engage is that the participants are more likely to engage in and with the subject matter from a point of view of comfort and ease, given that the sessions have been conducted in what for them are ‘naturalistic’ settings. We have also imagined that the very novelty of the use of the iPod for this type of purpose breaks down some of the initial discomfit and we have found a significant degree of willingness to participate in the study when the iPod is utilized. We have also used the voice recording function of the iPod to capture the conversations, where the participants have agreed to such recording.

\textit{Signing the School (2007-Date)}

In this final example, an international project conducted with the assistance of a colleague in Aotearoa New Zealand, we are in the process of developing a photographic diary of the ways in which schools in the current era present images of themselves to their community. One of most common ways that such projection occurs is through the use of messages erected on messageboards at the front of the school. While a large number of the images collected thus far in this project have been collected via a digital video camera (using the still camera option), we have also utilized the camera function of our mobile (cell) phones as well. The design of this project is such
that we have carefully planned, routine, data collection rounds.

The project will see us visit each of the thirty-seven schools in our local area that post messages for the school community on their message boards on each of four Fridays for the months of February, June, September and December. For these planned data collection activities, we use the higher quality digital camera. However, there is a second - serendipitous - data collection that is crucial to this project: often we will pass a school with a new message that we need to capture at the time (these messages change reasonable frequently). We realized that we couldn’t always travel with a camera, but that we typically always tended to have our mobile phones with us (such is the state of the modern world!!).

Fortunately, we have found that the camera function on these phones provides us with ready access to research photography (see Image 6).

**The Role of the Digital Audio-Visual in Contemporary Research**

Considerable intellectual effort has recently gone into imagining how the ethnographic endeavor might better come to genuinely (authentically) re-present the socioscape (Albrow, 1997) or cultural milieu under scrutiny. In our experience, threading forms of information, data, or evidence typically ascribed lesser places of significance and utility into ethnographic projects and accounts potentially moves us closer to this goal. For us, these non-traditional data sets have been largely digital, and our use of them has increased in both frequency and complexity as digital technological developments have led to cheaper and more sophisticated cameras and storage and analytical software packages.

The use of images to both illustrate a main narrative carried in traditional word-based textual format (projects 1 and 2 above) and to assume a major data and narrative function themselves (projects 3 and 4) has allowed us to deepen our level of analysis, and to develop a greater confidence in our readings of the field in question. As Byrne and Doyle point out: *The tradition in ethnographic work privileges the observer. The record is the observer’s, and so too is the interpretation which results.* (Byrne and Doyle, 2004, p170). With digital images, we have been able to very easily send collections of shots to informants, participants or relative strangers for their individual readings or interpretations. Many of the readings of images have occurred within minutes of their capture, from the display screen of the camera, so that fieldwork has become a more multi-media event for us, and seems to provide participants with another mode of engagement with the matter in question. We suspect that the quality of participant engagement with a project is enhanced the more the sensorium (Pink, 2006, p 5) is activated and brought to on the task at hand.

We have also found that the advent of digital voice recorders has added a dimension of facility to our
work that has allowed us to capture more naturalistic conversations and interviews for considerably longer periods of time than the standard C-60 audiotape allowed. The ease of incorporation of such digital audio data into research reports and other publications derived from our project work in similarly not to be understated. Add to these features the astonishing reduction in size accompanied by a remarkable increase in the recording range and quality of the new generation pocket digital voice recorders or note-takers and even the more familiar research interview becomes easier to conduct.

The very intrusive and intimidatory nature of a prominent black tape recorder with external microphone positioned centre-table to capture the exchange between interviewer and interviewee has, in our experience, often constrained the flow of conversation as the participants are constantly reminded of the relationship they inhabit in the exchange: You speak, and I’ll record and analyse. And let us not overlook the distraction factor wrought by the click of the end-of-tape shut off function and the subsequent fumbling to turn the tape over.

The new digital recorders are far easier to forget about, and frequently require no external microphone. Conversation can flow more informally with lesser chance that the conversants will be unduly reminded of the recording process. As with digital images, whole conversations can be downloaded in mp3 format (or similar) and emailed to participants for their own records, verification, confirmation and, occasionally analysis. The ease of drawing audio clips into research project reports and presentations is another feature of digitally-recorded audio data, a point we return to in the final section of this paper.

**Digitally Embracing the 8th & 9th Moments**

There are two complementary but intersecting imperatives that lead us to believe that the digital era may allow for furthering the democratizing of research. One of these is the imperative of the new ethnographies (Goodall, 2000) to engage the fuller range of human experience via the development of what Pink (2006) and others have termed an *anthropology of the senses*:

*I see the relationship between the visual and the other senses as key to understanding how everyday experiences and identities are constituted… it seems to me that one of the most important theoretical challenges is the question of how to situate the visual within an embodied and sensory anthropology - more specifically, what the relationship is between the visual and the other senses.* (p 17).

The second intersecting imperative is the Ninth Moment challenge of pursuing “a socially and cultural responsive, communitarian, justice-oriented set of studies” (Denzin and Lincoln 2005, p 1123). From our perspective, the question posed and responded to by Bodone and her collaborators: “What difference does research make and for whom?” (2005) needs to be kept in the forefront of the minds of all who inquire into the human condition:

*The essence of qualitative research resides in the voices that we (researchers) solicit out in the field. The intellectual and philosophical exercise that falls to us is our transformative sensibility and the accountability that develops … as we go out in the field and co n t u e to ask individuals to help develop and inform our inquiry; we need to question the why of our actions, the application and relevance of our emerging theories to the lives and experiences of those who lend us their time, local knowledge and expertise. We also need to think further than the answers to our questions, into ways to sustain emerging transformation (provoked by research) over time and people.* (Bodone, 2005, p 2)

We believe at present that new digital technologies will aid this project more in the sociological than in the anthropological sphere, the former tending (in general) to be more reformist in its orientation than the latter. In our experience thus far, a greater range of participant input to a research project is greatly facilitated by opening up the scope of “legitimate” data sources and sets. The use of the camera function common to most mobile (cell) phones is but one example of this, as is the capacity for digitally documenting the lived space that seems to flow from the use of digital image making hardware and editing software. As Mauad and Rouveral argue:

*It is not simply that photographs make accessible (and therefore democratize) the reading and making of history. It is also that photographs - by revealing multiple stories, contrasts and contradictions, ambiguities and uncertainties - enrich the analysis, deepen and complicate the story we can tell through words.*

The aim is not only to provoke deeper responses from the reader of research based upon a thickening of the description, but also

*to challenge the writers and makers of history: to ‘visualize’ new kinds of knowledge, to ‘visualize’ new forms of history”* (Mauad & Rouveral, 2004, pp 188-189)
The ways in which new digital technologies might contribute to a more transformative research practice will, obviously, depend on the hearts and resolve of those for whom such technologies are accessible. Our own work is drawing together audio and visual data and representations and throwing these into new hypermedia constellations that should enable a more two-way engagement with the research.

This is an area ripe for further inquiry and development, bearing in mind Seaman and Wright’s prediction that:

> the best hypermedia ethnographies will be a fluid mix of sound, image and text constructed in such a way to take advantage of its strongest features (Seaman and Wright 1992, p 308).

To conclude, Geertz challenged ethnographers to thicken their descriptive work through a greater immersion in the contextual sphere surrounding the topic under scrutiny. Denzin and Lincoln have sketched probable (and problematic) futures for those who would see their research work as being in service to human betterment. Our experience is that new technologies may well allow the merging of the two streams of concern.

References


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