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Documentation to representation: when video trace evidence is presented as ethnography

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Documentation to representation: when video trace evidence is presented as ethnography

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As an introduction...

I am a specialist practitioner in ethnography predominantly (but not exclusively) within the commercial insights-strategy arena, with particular expertise in rapid participant-observation methods for market and consumer research.

I am a skilled videographer, editor and documentary filmmaker. I have also produced literally hundreds of video ethnography and video insight programs for a wide variety of insights-strategy applications and clients.

In a nutshell:

I research and produce real world insights - Intimate ethnographic portraits of real people and their subjectivities underpinned with strategic learnings for how to communicate with them, how to innovate for them, how to service them, and how to position brands towards them for the future.

I also produce illumination films, animations and documentaries that bring established research findings to life as tools to educate, influence, disrupt or inspire key audiences.
Today’s presentation is informed by my personal experience of practically applying the art and science of ethnography and videography in a commercial research context over the course of more than a decade.

Specifically, I will illuminate on the role of video “trace” evidence in the ethnographic process.

I have also developed this presentation with the presumption that many in the audience are new to ethnography or might be confused about the role of video in ethnographic research.
If you take nothing else away from this presentation, I want to establish that ethnography is not documentation only. A great deal of commercial research research is sold under the rubric of ethnography, when it should not.

Examples of research practices that I have heard people refer to as video ethnography in the past include:

• Vox Pops
• Formal Video interviews conducted in peoples’ homes (but not informed by the cultural or social context)
• Usage and Behavior videos using complete observer methods only (without any reflexive inquiry with insiders)
• Consumer video diaries (that really should be considered cultural texts, not ethnographic insight)
• Sending of visual data from mobile phones by consumers in real-time to researchers who can ask immediate questions through text messaging

In this presentation, I will question whether these research practices really constitute ethnography, or whether they might actually be better described as etic documentation of what people say and do, or... un-contextualized trace evidence.
To document something is to create a trace as evidence, in effect a description, through writing, by sketching it, photography, filming and audio recording. In ethnography we record a trace of what insiders say and do within the context of inquiry. This trace should not be confused as the ethnography, nor should it be considered reality. It is simply a recording by the person documenting the phenomena. The robustness of the trace as evidence is contingent upon the skill of the researcher and their mastery over their chosen means of documentation.
This is an example from a video ethnography where I explored the challenges that parents face shopping with kids. You can view the actual video via a link on the website.

As you can see, each frame presents a different perspective. That is because I employed wide shots, mid shots and close-ups as I recorded the trace. When combined into a sequence they tell a simple, but powerful story.

As ethnographers our purpose is not simply to describe people and their worlds. We need to to offer rich description with insights. When we record an ethnographic journal, for instance, we are making observations and analysis in our description. We might also employ literary license and an extensive vocabulary to evoke feelings and perspectives in relation to lived experiences.

Film and video is a language that we can harness in a similar manner. If we can film and edit trace materials with a keen observer’s eye, both descriptively and evocatively... If we can employ the breadth of the language of filmmaking to our advantage, it will ultimately enrich the quality of our description and the ethnography as a whole.
In commercial video ethnography, therefore, the ideal is to combine the skills, knowledge and language of a filmmaker with the experience and expertise of an ethnographer or cultural/social inquirer, who possesses a strong grasp of the client’s business and marketing challenges, and has the ability to link ethnographic insight back to managerial implications.

If we are weak in any of these areas it is going to impact the robustness of our original trace evidence. Quite simply, we risk producing a trace that is fundamentally lacking in data richness and relevance to the commercial imperatives.

For example, if there are two ethnographers with equal experience and their trace tool is sketching pictures of their observations, but one is a professional illustrator and the other has no skill in illustrating, then it goes without saying that the ethnographer with the greater skill in illustrating will record richer, more evocative data.

Most consumer video diaries are produced by people who are not ethnographers and not filmmakers. In terms of ethnographic insight, these documents are data poor because the individual is usually weak across the three areas of trace tools, methods and analysis. In effect, consumer video diaries should be considered as cultural texts or ethnographic artifacts. To understand what they really mean really requires a
Building on Ray’s earlier presentation... when ethnography is broken down into its parts we see that trace evidence is only a fraction of the equation. A lot of inexperienced researchers pick up a Flip video camera, go out, make a trace documentation of an informal interview or observation in a context of inquiry, then present it as the findings. But it is the methods and the analysis that ultimately inform how to document and then how to represent the original trace materials in a meaningful, insightful way.
A lot of what people tend to refer to as video ethnography is simply data poor video trace evidence of behavior produced using a complete observer method. In other words, in the context of inquiry, insiders are not engaged by the researcher to provide insight into the lived experience of their own behavior. Consequently, the researcher is forced to draw upon their own assumptions in their interpretation of that behavior. In the end, the conclusions that the researcher makes tell you more about the researcher and their experience as an outsider than it does about the lived experience of the people who actually belong to the context inquiry.

A few years back I designed and implemented an observer-as-participant study exploring what it means to be a man, specific to a target market for an FMCG client. Other agencies were proposing extremely expensive complete observation studies, which effectively involved living with men and documenting their every move, fly-on-the-wall style, but not engaging with them. However, by collaborating with insiders (instead of observing them like guinea pigs) we were able to penetrate the masculinity values and belief systems of a variety of groups of men without an exhaustive observational or full-participant study. A simple technique like getting insiders to tell the story behind cultural practices and objects (in this case a hubcap planted on the wall) can lead to profound ethnographic insight. In this respect, choosing the right method is crucial to capturing the critical video trace evidence, or ethnographic data.
Following method, analysis informs how we represent video trace evidence to make it more accurate, meaningful and insightful to subjective vantage points for the research audience. First and foremost, analysis enables the ethnographer to identify and contextualize the key ethnographic insights from the trace evidence. Without analysis video trace evidence remains raw ethnographic data. After analysis the video is contextualized and becomes ethnographic insight.
It is therefore useful to think of video editing as part of the analytical process in which we make lots of critical decisions. Sometimes less is more and long tracks of video footage actually inhibit insight. Sometimes we need to tell a full story and provide deeper context and background to who people are, how they live and what they live for. In this instance, we may choose to create a standalone documentary film out of the trace evidence and add in elements like voice over narration to help contextualize the data.

Invariably, analysis impacts how ethnographers represent video trace evidence. We should never presume that the original trace is enough in itself to constitute ethnography.
As a commercial researcher who specializes in ethnography and video applications to insights-strategy challenges I am constantly asked by people – what is ethnography? The first thing I say to them is that the obsession with video trace evidence and technology-based observation has resulted in a dilution of what ethnography means and its overall usefulness. As important as video is to my own service offering, I am keen for ethnography to mean something again. To do this, as commercial researchers I believe that we need to draw a line in the sand as to where ethnography begins and ends. We need to have a clear understanding of the role of trace evidence in documenting and representing ethnographic data and insights. And, we need to know that studying consumption rituals, practices and interactions in real world contexts – if it is to be called ethnography, involves exploring what those rituals, practices and interactions mean to people in a broader context of lived experience, not just the consumption activity itself.
Final thoughts...

- Know the difference between a video as a trace and ethnography!
- If you are a researcher, ask yourself – have I engaged with the whole ethnographic process?
- Remember to match trace tools, methods, analysis and representation to what it is you need to know and communicate about a context and its insiders
- Team up if you want to make your video trace evidence more robust

◊ Thanks for your time!
Q & A

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Nick has a Twitter account under “RealEthnography”
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