

Performers and Partners

Consumer Video Documentaries in Ethnographic Research

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This paper explores the role of video in ethnographic U.S. market research. We suggest that video is the fantasy *du jour* for marketers and the question we pose is why? What has made videotape so appealing and so seductive? The belief in video's objectivity? Video's tangible and physical record? Its promise of entertainment? We address these questions by discussing a particular form of video research – the Video Diary – used in our own work. In doing so, we illustrate assumptions and conventions surrounding the medium, and address the cultural context that frames respondents' behavior in qualitative research, a frame that renders them as both performers and partners.

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Introduction



Figure 1 and Figure 2. Untitled.

When in 1963, at a meeting of anthropologists, I began to point out that the films and photographs made by students in colleges, people in their homes; as well as mental patients in hospitals, could be looked at as ways in which these different people structured their world, rather than as ‘true images’ of the world, I thought I was merely bringing a truism about drawing and painting up to date (Worth, 1977:5)

Interest in ethnographic, in-situ approaches in U.S. marketing and design fields exploded during the 1990s. While anthropologists have been carrying out ethnographic market and consumer research for decades (Boram, 1988), the advent of account planning in U.S. advertising and developments in industrial design were important catalysts of more intensified interest. At the 1999 Account Planning Group conference, the term “ethnography” was pervasive – sometimes synonymous with “market research” and at other times with “account planning” (Frank, 1999). As Frank noted in Harper’s Magazine, anthropology had become “the sales fantasy *du jour*” for advertisers (Frank, 1999:78). In industrial design, ethnography – in one form or another – was offered by virtually every major design firm by 1997 (Wasson, 2000; see also Squires and Byrne, 2002). In consumer research, ethnographic practices – often implemented simply as observation or interviewing at home – were viewed

as an antidote to the focus group. Ethnography was undertaken in the hopes of a more ‘real,’ more ‘truthful’ consumer story; going ‘deeper’ was a common metaphor (Denny, 1999).

What we are seeing now, however, is that videotaping is becoming synonymous with ethnography. Indeed, as the new promise in market research, ethnography is being overshadowed by videotape.

- In May, 2001, an *Adweek* column was entitled: “*Candid Camera: Will video replace focus groups as the core of research?*” It concluded with, “*The ability to see into lives as they are lived, rather than they are reported, could prompt advertising’s next evolution*” (Mitchell, 2001:16).
- In June, 2001, *Adweek* selected Emma Gilding, head of Ogilvy & Mather’s Discovery Group, as among 5 who have the “*coolest jobs in advertising.*” The subtitle here was: “*The ex-theatre director moves in, then films consumers in their own homes.*” The synonymous status of ethnography and video is further evidenced with the sentence: “*With a video camera you can see the difference between what people say they do and what they actually do* (O’Leary, 2001:27).
- In our own experience, the use of video as a component of the ethnographic process was sporadically requested during the mid-1990s, frequently requested by the late 1990s, and since the advent of 2000, is an assumed requirement. While most frequently we have incorporated video as an adjunct to written presentations we have also been asked to incorporate video within the presentation itself. Without video, reports are “uninteresting.”

The ability to use video recording for research, or to include edited portions in presentations are, of course, trends made possible by advances in digital technologies and concomitant reductions in price and complexity for the user. The technology is now available and (relatively) accessible. But, beyond just the technological availability, the use of videotape

for research has caught the imaginations of brand managers, advertisers, designers, and researchers (Wasson, 2001). It has become a selling-point for consumer research firms to engage ‘professional videographers.’

In essence, if anthropology was the fantasy *du jour* in 1999, video is the fantasy *du jour* in 2002. The central question we pose in this paper is why? What is it about videotape that has made it so appealing, so entrancing and so seductive as to be the next evolutionary stage of advertising? Is it the belief in video’s objectivity? Its tangible and physical record? Is it the appeal of entertainment implicit in the notion of ‘movies’? We address these questions by discussing a particular form of video research – the Video Diary – used in our own work. In doing so, we illustrate the conventions and performance implicit in videotaped behavior and viewing, and address more general issues of what videotape offers qualitative research in today’s consumer world.

What are Video Diaries?

Video Diary is the short-hand term we have applied for videotaped ‘documentary’ products which are self-produced by consumers. We have used this method, or perhaps better said assigned this task to consumers, for a range of projects: microwave and refrigerator use, the cooking of favorite meals, the life of pickup trucks, channel selection among satellite and digital TV subscribers, skincare routines, and beer drinking. As a rule, we choose from the most telling (and well-produced) diaries and edit these into a composite video for the client. Our edited tapes are 30 minutes to an hour in length – lengths that are, no doubt, implicitly linked to the norms of television programming and typical lengths of blank video cassettes. These lengths are sometimes deemed excessive by clients, especially those accustomed to the need of telling entire (advertising) stories in 15 to 60 seconds, but we keep the edited tapes long and without any added voice-over or text in order to convey a sense of ethnographic

texture and depth. In essence we construct the videos in a combination of the cinema vérité and observational cinema traditions of ethnographic film (see Barbash & Taylor, 1997; Ruby, 2000).

Our thematic editing is centered on the analytic findings and depends on the issue at hand. For a beer drinking study, the client was concerned with ‘who are my consumers and for what kinds of occasions do they drink beer?’ Based on these questions and the material the young men of the study provided us, we were able to feature 5 different men, each one looking at the world from a slightly different angle, e.g., an evening in a life, a week in a life, people and places, and so on. The quality of the segments in the final video was variable, dependent as it always is, on the technology and skills possessed by individual respondents or their family members and friends willing to take part. For this project, Roland was a bit of a star. We titled Roland’s video diary (which barely needed further editing on our part) ‘A look at a life’ and used it as the opening piece because he explicitly set out the task for viewers, “*During the next week I am going to be recording my life, and the role that alcohol plays in my life, and the role that people and music also play in my life*” and then proceeded to take us on a descriptive tour of his bedroom, bathroom, and kitchen. Very entertainingly done, he included a brief snippet of himself playing the violin and explained the papers taped to his wall that laid out his ideal daily schedule, as well as his tripartite “daily exercise, no junk food, fix my own lunch” set of goals. We had glimpses at his music and recording equipment, the neighborhood as seen from his window, the mess of papers needing to be sorted that covered his bedroom floor (see Figures 3-5).



Figure 3. Roland demonstrates for the camera the kind of music he likes to play.



Figure 4. Even though not always achieved, goals Roland proudly displays.



Figure 5. "Papers that need to be sorted on the floor ... the Stan Getz transcription I've been working on."

Putting the camera into the hands of research participants is not novel on our part. It has been repeated and reinvented numerous times by anthropologists and ethnographic filmmakers.

Nanook of the North, a classic of ethnographic film, was realized by the partnership of Robert Flaherty and the Inuit in the 1920s. Jean Rouch, whose work was crucial in the development of cinema vérité, was also a strong advocate of collaborative filmmaking. From the 1950s, he

shared cameras, production and editing decisions with fellow Parisians as well as West Africans. In anthropology, the recent development of this tradition is found in the move to examine indigenous media (see Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod and Larkin, 2002).

Depending on the appropriateness of the medium for the subject at hand, we have found video diaries very useful. They increase consumer input and thereby strengthen a collaborative relationship with respondents. When we ask respondents to create a video diary, they speak to us as they produce it. Though we are off-screen and off-premise, our presence still exists. They have become our partners in a common enterprise. The video documentary method also has the advantage of producing data that stretch traditional boundaries of consumer research in terms of space and time – we cannot always be there. They are cultural documents that tell us something about how consumers conceive of their worlds and themselves within that world. And, finally, they allow us to bring our findings to life for clients. In Roland's life salient categories include health (exercise, junk food), music composition – the latter in competition with his social life, and eccentricity and irony (as became increasingly apparent as his video diary continued).

It is also important to note that video diaries exist as a convention in popular culture. There are web pages for video diaries on the World Cup and The Earth Summit 2002. Children with asthma have filmed themselves so that physicians could better understand their condition (Rich et al., 2000). MTV's *The Real World* and family 'home movies' are forms of video diaries. The BBC has broadcast a video diary series. In applied and academic consumer research circles, even if still relatively novel, the movement runs apace. As Belk pointed out in 1998, "giving the camera to informants is another technique that has begun to enter consumer research" (1998:319).

In practice we have found that consumer-created video, and ethnographic videos more generally, evoke an interrelated set of promises and disappointments which we explore below. These utopian visions and their attendant disappointments are themselves instructive texts – illustrative of the culturally conceived constructions brought to the medium.

The Promise of Video (1): The Whole Truth and Nothing But The Truth

And when we think of the ‘real’, the factual or the ‘everyday’, we tend to think of something which is other to fiction, which is somehow unscripted, un-performed and otherwise unrehearsed (Pini, 2001:12).

As noted earlier, when ethnography was embraced in the 1990s, one of the values with which it was imbued was the ability to get to some deeper, more real truth than was possible in the focus group room. However simplistic and erroneous this formulation, it has been re-created by the promise of video. If ethnography was to get researchers beyond the stilted format and respondent performances of focus groups, video is viewed as getting researchers beyond subjectivity altogether. Despite a postmodern critique to the contrary, a camera still evokes traditional and widespread cultural notions of the objectivity, reliability, and neutrality of the lens, and fuels – once again – the dream that an unadulterated, unfiltered truth can exist.

But of course, it cannot work that way. A camera’s eye is a narrow lens, always placed and directed by a human eye. The camera lens necessarily takes in a very small slice of life, and some things will be out of the frame. Even when a camera sweeps from spot to spot, some things will be missed. And of course cameras are turned off. The record is never ‘total’ and the ‘reading’ of the record still always depends on the interpreter. Film and video are human created representations of reality – we produce and decode them through knowledge of their semiotic grammars (see Barbash & Taylor, 1997; Worth, 1977). Nonetheless, the camera in

today's world continues to create and confer a sense of reality not captured by ethnographic notes.

Trends in technology and popular culture have coincided to make the video camera in the form of surveillance both commonplace and desired. These conventional practices reinforce the conflation of real-time behavior with truth. We are accustomed to a video camera at an automated cash machine, in elevators of large buildings, on the grounds of government buildings, in stores and in casinos. Most people frame these cameras as providing – not compromising – security. With the web we now have Web Cam and ‘streaming video’ which can foster anything from the practical (viewing traffic at a busy intersection in order to re-route a commute) to the political (being able to ‘sit in’ on local city council meetings) to the prurient (need we explain?). These offerings are simultaneously viewed as enhancements of individual power and enactments of democracy. These practices suggest to us that nothing goes missing, that the record is total and that truth results from the continuous, omniscient view (cf. Foucault, 1978). In our own work, too many dissolves in an edit cause credibility anxiety among our clients. In essence the cutting violates the semiotic conventions of video that signal ‘truth’ to viewers (via continuous reality).

If reality and truth value are culturally contiguous categories, performance and reality (and truth) are conceived as opposites. A criticism we have heard applied to Roland's video diary is that it portrays a performance. Roland does perform, and he does endeavor to show and tell us only what he wants us to know. After Roland is finished providing us with a tour of his home and his possessions, his diary continues with a scene of himself and friends at a local bar.

Outside of the bar Roland focuses the camera on and introduces Charles, one of his friends. Charles then cooperates by introducing the bar to viewers while Roland moves the camera to a shot of the bar's awning. Inside the bar, Roland coaxes two

other friends: *“Johanna, wave to the camera; and Dave, wave to the camera.”*

Charles asks if it is alright to curse. Roland then enlists Charles for the role of videographer/interviewer by giving him the camera and saying, *“Ask me what I’m drinking.”* Charles seizes the role and the task and queries Roland on his agenda for the evening, even as Roland reaches to take the camera back. After Charles further exploits the situation as an opportunity to tease Roland, Roland reaches across to retake control of the camera and turns it off.

After the bar scenes we are introduced to Roland’s workplace, a university laboratory. Again Roland starts with introductions by prodding a co-worker to *“say hi to the camera.”* We also reencounter Charles. After brief introductions to the lab benches and activities and jokes about ‘shoddy’ science (the laboratory is part of a prestigious university), Roland reappears at his desk with his hair held in multiple tufts with small rubber bands (see Fig. 6). Roland may want to demonstrate the pleasure he

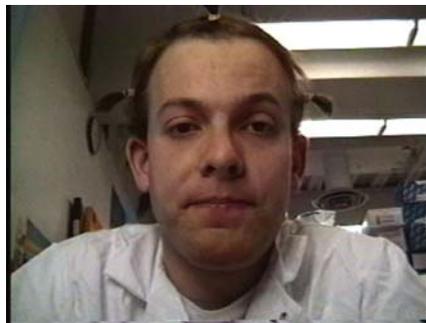


Figure 6. Roland in the lab where he works, ironic rubber-banded coif in place, he reflects on what beer means to him.

finds in seeming eccentric, ironic, and not taking himself too seriously. But the off-the-cuffness is countered by the intensity, thoughtfulness and seriousness with which he tries to get his message across to us regarding how he feels about beer and its different brands, despite on-going interruptions from Charles. Finally, Roland has the last word in the form of a cutting joke of his own, and tells us that one of the brands he drinks he does so because, *“It’s not afraid to be what it is.”* A message

similar to what Roland has conveyed about himself and his life in the video, though this part is left unsaid.

We would argue that Roland's performance, or that of his friends, does not make the 'text' of the video diary any less real or telling. For when is social life without performance? As ethnomethodological and ethnography of communication research made abundantly clear many years ago, performance is crucial to the maintenance of the interactional flow of everyday life (Goffman 1959; 1963; Gumperz & Hymes, 1972; Schegloff, 1987). Culturally specified, learned, and rehearsed, performative routines (in physical and verbal actions) are part of what make life both predictable and intelligible. These routines are embedded, implicated, reflective and productive of culture, that convoluted semiotic matrix in which we live.

The presence of a shooting camera is a highly salient cue for specified routines. Frequently photographed children know the social conventions of 'being photographed' and most can perform the appropriate behaviors before they can talk. Kodak now equips its dual mode digital cameras, which can record video or stills, with a dual indicator light. Research showed that people needed to know whether a still or video was being shot so they could act appropriately, i.e., move or stay still (Kodak, 2002).

Roland performed, and he alerted his friends to perform by signaling the presence of the running camera and with direct commands. But we maintain that the performance of routines, including those associated with the act of recording, do not in any way impede the possibilities of cultural analysis; again, these routines are themselves embodiments of culture. Roland's video diary conveys culturally meaningful information which can be leveraged by clients. We know, at the least, his appreciation for irony and eccentricity.

To accept that because something is performed it does not convey ‘real’ information is to force oneself into a needlessly linear and simplistic box. As Pini has pointed out in her discussion of video diary performance in a study for which she used the method to explore social class among British teenage girls, while the girls performed things from secret confessionals to the mocking of middle class norms, nonetheless:

Social class thoroughly saturates each and every one of these diaries. It speaks through bodies, in accent, in composure, in dress, in a diarist's level of ease and so forth. It speaks through objects, through a room's decoration, through what hangs on a girl's wall, through what shows through her window (a large green garden or a crowded street or block of other flats for example). It speaks through the *mise en scene* of the diary. In short, it speaks itself through the whole feel, style and theme of the diary (Pini, 2001:8).

As Pini further argues, genres of reality and confessional television served as cultural context and model for the girls as individuals, performers, and research participants. We witness this phenomenon in our research practice as well. These television shows are important contemporary forms of entertainment and just as other celebrities have evidently been quite eager to take part in the fame and fun that Ozzy and some of the other Osbournes have derived from their ‘reality’ show, our respondents can feel that this is part of what they get from completing a video diary. When we conduct ethnographic videotaped interviews, our younger respondents (20s and 30s) will sometimes cheerfully tell us that they feel like they are participants of MTV’s *Real World*. Cooking respondents do not always tell us that they feel they are ‘on a cooking show’ but they clearly know how to do ‘cooking show,’ even replete with Emeril’s ‘BAM!’. Viewers draw from the same matrix of cultural conventions and meaning to interpret what they see. More than once we heard in response to the taped scenes of one Mexican American grandmother’s cooking that ‘she should have her own cooking show.’ This respondent knew the conventions of talking aloud, she always told us

what she was doing. She had her bowls out when we arrived at her home and she had pre-cooked items that took a lot of time. She fully lives in a wider popular culture, as do all our respondents and clients for whatever the project. The frames of popular culture are drawn on by producers and interpreters of performance.

Thus, as we view and analyze video diaries we need not seek objective truth but to understand what we see through a cultural lens. As Valentine noted, “*Our interpretive role is not to look for ‘truth’; but to crack the code*” (1995:31). With video diaries (and video more generally), we must appreciate the cultural content, including the semiotic conventions drawn upon for video production, and appreciate the assumptions and meanings brought to interpretation of the products.

Let us note now that the woman leaning on the wall (Figure 1) and the man with the camera (Figure 2) which opened this essay are sculptures. Do they nonetheless show us reality? And speak to us about cultural ideas of wealth, privilege or posing? Or, the idea of the documentary observer, *mise en scène*, taking pictures?

The Promise of Video (2): A ‘Complete’ Ethnographic Database

Now this is reality TV. But the only one watching is Procter & Gamble Co. Starting in July, the maker of Tide laundry detergent, Pampers diapers and Crest toothpaste plans to send video crews and cameras into about 80 households around the world, hoping to capture, on tape, life’s daily routine and procedures in all their boring glory.... In a recent test of the program, P&G marketers huddled around a computer in a Cincinnati conference room to watch a mother make breakfast in a tidy kitchen in Thailand (Nelson, 2001:B1).

The second promise of ethnographic videotape is the complete database. In its idealized form this database is comprehensive and exhaustive. Again, developments in digital and web-

based technologies have fed into this dream. We now imagine not only that we can have videotapes (or CDs with video) on file, but that segments can be hypermedia linked with other resources or that sections of an enormous web-based searchable video database could be ‘instantly’ retrieved to desktops and laptops for the viewing of interested individuals. All available at the touch of a button, of course. Such is Procter and Gamble’s goal, as reported by *The Wall Street Journal*, “a huge video library, organized by key words” (Nelson, 2001:B4).

There is nothing novel in the dream of an ethnographic database. The general idea was evident in the early comparative culture work of explorers, naturalists and theoreticians and continued in the form of the research process and prose publications of Boas and Malinowski, those generally credited with the establishment of anthropology as a discipline as it now exists in the U.S. and Britain. The Human Relations Area Files, developed at Yale in the late 1930s by anthropologist Rupert Murdoch and still in existence today (with CD and web-based versions) are generally cited as the classic example of the attempt to create an ethnographic database. These files, covering over 300 societies and inclusive of 700 headings, were conceived as a resource for scholars. From the beginning, it was an indexed file of anthropological findings, neatly categorized with headings such as marriage, family, meals, subsistence or religious beliefs; its purpose was to make cross-cultural study and comparison easily doable. The impulse to collect and catalogue ethnographic films *and* film footage, and to have them serve as a database for future researchers has also been evident from the time the first footage was developed (see Ruby, 2000; chapter 1).

Databases of ethnographic materials are replete with problems, not the least of which concern the context and intent of the original research. Nonetheless, there are good reasons for clients to attempt to create a database of their own consumer ethnographic video footage. The sheer number of hours of produced video in any given consumer research project is daunting (25-

150 hours typically). In our experience it is rare that the client stakeholders in a project have the time (even if the inclination is there) to view the material. Corporations rarely have the internal resources to integrate the viewing of raw material into daily business life. And on the rare occasion that they do, the task is often relegated to interns or junior staff. As a result, ethnographic video footage of interviews or video diaries goes unviewed and unused. The promise of a complete database, indexed for any search request is an alluring concept, one which promises that the valuable resource can be mined.

Still, the vision is rife with difficulty. Indexes, the core of any database, are culturally encoded. In P&G's case, we might imagine an index to include snacks, family time, cleaning rituals, or laundry. But, what *is* 'a snack'? What is 'family time'? What constitutes cleaning? Categories carry cultural baggage. The coder's own cultural categories become the lens through which other behavior is seen, quite literally. The final product is only as good as the translation ability of the indexer. Whether across cultures or within one's own, this is no mean feat.

A second difficulty is time; it does not stand still. Databases require constant updating. New metaphors, new behaviors, new ideas emerge in popular culture – shading the interpretive context for what is observed. A few years ago, for example, we would not have seen computing metaphors used to describe productivity – metaphors which liken brain power to hard drives or bandwidth and our filing systems to the desktop of computers (Gleick, 1999; Turkle, 1984; 1997). And these changes occur for those who conduct the research (or choose where to place the camera), for those researched, for those who do the coding, and for those who do the retrieving.

In the end, the implicit pact of the complete database promise requires two things: longitudinal commitment in time and resources, and awareness that the information must be

filtered and interpreted. Can it be done? Of course. But it will not be easy and it will never be complete. Neither social life, nor social ideas, stand still.

The Promise of Video (3): Inspiration

Remote, in New York, has its own twist to the entertainment concept: It's provided patrons with video monitors and cameras to zoom in on each other, turning the clubbers themselves into the center of attention. Co-owner Kevin Centanni says the idea was to capitalize on the reality-television craze and bring in the dating crowd obsessed with technology (Collins, 2002: W12).

The final promise of videotape in marketing worlds is its ability to go beyond enlightenment and actually inspire creatives, r&d, brand managers or media directors. Film, video and television are the American storytellers. In the U.S. best-selling novels are quickly transformed into films. Classics of literature can be viewed on the television; and even if problematic, successful theatre makes its way to screens. Going beyond these fiction-associated genres, enlightenment and entertainment are not mutually exclusive categories for Americans – U.S. news programs are both famous for (and seen to suffer from) the need to entertain. Americans are not alone in this tradition. The British are often considered masters in the use of humor to grab and sustain attention (even if not for the news) and the U.K. has been an important source for American reality and game show television concepts in the last few years. Moreover, the popularity of reality TV, a paradigmatic mix of enlightenment and entertainment, is not the sole province of the U.S. or U.K.

Expectations of entertainment in video can be read in our audience's posture. When we present a report – with or without PowerPoint slides – the posture of the audience reflects 'business meeting' or 'serious lecture.' That is, there is perusal of handouts, participants' pens are in hand, notes are jotted, computers open. When the switch is made to video (or even in

anticipation of video), pens will be put down, notebooks pushed away, people sit back ever so slightly in their chairs and, often, smile. The palpable sense in the room is that the good stuff is coming. Turning off lights in the room, frequently a necessity for viewing, only adds to the allure.

Entertainment value is a conscious consideration in our choice of material to present in video. If in our written and verbal presentations we interject humor to grab and sustain attention, in our video editing decisions, it is a prime consideration. The video *must* have the power to capture and hold viewer attention. Does it tell a good story, either directly by the respondents' telling of a story or in the unfolding of drama akin to what we expect from cinema and television? Is there 'action' in addition to 'talking heads'?

We have felt that we must make these kinds of choices because of the cultural conventions surrounding video viewing. Once bored, people freely 'turn off' from video. Rather than make attempts to sharpen their focus on the content of the video, most people will shift their attention. As a cultural convention, we do not look at video as we do other data. For instance, in a spreadsheet of numbers one is expected to try to discern the patterns, extract and analyze the information one wants or needs to obtain. In the case of video, we might hope that people will appreciate the cultural complexity of the consumption context or the way in which the social environment influences the meaning of a brand, even if the drama drags. But generally this appreciation does not occur; more likely the video will not even be watched if it does not tell an entertaining story. It is a widespread cultural articulation that documentaries are boring, and most filmmakers accept that if they want their work to be watched, they better make it interesting. Culturally, we do not have the same arsenal of conventions for interpreting visual media that we do for prose. When reading a novel we tend to curl up in a chair, for a research journal article we sit upright with pen, keyboard or notepad, with our minds similarly aligned. With video and film, the entertainment posture predominates.

Notably, our video diary respondents share the convention that they should be entertaining and tell good stories. A telling example of this can be gleaned from the diary of another of the young beer drinkers (Figures 7 and 8). Scott's diary was used to illustrate "an evening in a life."



Figure 7. Scott, starting the evening off with a beer and some music to accompany it.



Figure 8. After 3:30 am, in the subway, a long night. Shaking the hands of the President the night before adds a certain degree of irony to it all for Scott.

Scott started showing us the evening at around 5pm, at a friend's house, with images of himself reaching into a refrigerator to pull out the beer. Afterwards we go along with him and various friends to a restaurant, a bar, and then after 3:30am, back to another friend's home. In between these stops, we see scenes of Scott walking down the street, all skillfully shot by the aspiring filmmaker friend Scott had enlisted to help with his diary. During these interstitial moments Scott seems to have an urge to talk and do things which he deems more interesting. At one point, after he runs and jumps to put his arms around his friends walking in front of him, we hear the story

about how he and the friend on his left shook hands with the President, “*in perhaps a similar state, 24 short hours ago.*” Coming up a subway platform, he playfully moons the camera.

Clients have told us that they would prefer us to use professional videographers to ensure high quality footage and that they would like our deliverable to be in attention-grabbing, audiovisual form. The impetus for this desire is to make the research results ‘live’ within the corporation. PowerPoint research reports end up gathering dust, are rarely re-read, their implications forgotten. Clients need something that will capture the imaginations of their colleagues and their own internal or external clients. Hence they turn to video or the promise of its incorporation in multi-media forms.

In a recent project we delivered a PowerPoint report along with an hour-long edited videotape consisting of in-home ethnography and video diary material. We were then scheduled to return later in the month for an innovation workshop. Workshop participants, many of whom had not attended the presentation, were asked by the project leader to read the report, look at the video and, if they desired, to choose from among the ‘original’ tapes labeled with green dots – a rudimentary indexing system of the most telling tapes. When we arrived at the workshop, we heard numerous references to the people featured on the videotape. They had become real. We heard no mentions of anything from the PowerPoint report. Though we would like to believe that some of the analytic points had been absorbed, we had little hard evidence that it had even been read.

Stories do provide a helpful framework for memory. They can be a good means of conveying moral lessons as well as information derived from theoretical insights. At the same time, we worry whether videotaped consumer stories adequately convey to viewers the theoretical and analytic insights of the ethnographic research vis-à-vis the business question – be it new

products, new advertising or brand positioning. One of the truisms of film and video is the uncertainty and instability of the interpretive meanings that the viewer brings to the viewing. While generally the case for all stories and information, in non-fiction prose we have well-established conventions for signaling to the reader what is important, what is speculation, what is fact, and what is implication. The reader is able to disregard or otherwise interpret the meaning the author intends, but the conventions exist to negotiate the information.

Conventions that do exist for creating factual or analytic videos derive from documentary in which static headshots and the voice of authority loom large. Visual anthropologists have frequently stressed that these conventions are not ones which best express the complexities of life as it is lived. This is the basis of our decision to edit video diaries without explanatory text or voiceover – we hope the ethnographic video will be able to retain its power to portray cultural complexity and texture. But then, in our presentations, we bring in semiotic cultural analysis and the implications we see via written text and verbally delivered messages. We intersperse these with the showing of the video in order to enhance the appreciation of both. While tomorrow, new technologies in hypermedia may give us other possibilities, other means and other conventions for producing, viewing, and interpreting visual media (see Belk, 1998; Biella, 1993; Kozinets, 2002), for today, video is entertainment.

Conclusion

In the video diary assignments we give to consumers, we ask them to reflect at the end of their tapes on what they have learned about themselves in the course of making their diaries and to speak to us about the images they have collected of themselves. A tenet of anthropology is that culture is practiced, so we do want to have behavior and ‘life as it’s lived’ in the video diaries. A second tenet of anthropology is that ethnographic enquiry entails an understanding of the insider point of view. Thus we have respondents ‘think aloud’ to us about what they are doing or have done. Applied to consumer research a sleight of hand

has occurred which transformed ethnography into observational research, now encapsulated and crystallized by videotape (cf. Wasson, 2000). Yes, ethnography in the form of observational research can tell us that knobs are in the wrong place or that pickle jars are difficult to open, but these are pale offerings compared to what a semiotically-based, participant-centered ethnographic analysis is capable of providing.

In the reflections that Scott provided at the end of his video diary he tells us that the scene which best describes his preferred beers is the one late at night when he is walking around Brooklyn. The reflection of the rain, he says, provides a sort of “*mellow, classy, little bit of a romantic feeling*” which “*is to me the same kind of feeling that I get when I’m enjoying something that I like, like a good beer.*” He then tells us that the mooning of the camera sequence represents a brand he disdains but nonetheless drinks and it, like his gesture to the camera, is akin to the sentiments and his sense of himself from high school, a quality and a form of activity he hopes never to lose. Scott in his video is both performer and partner. The utopian promises of ethnographic videotape in consumer research, as we have described in this paper, divorce analysis from the data. Whether in the quest for objective truth, the allure of an exhaustive database or in the seduction of entertainment, the video stands alone. In this scenario, the role of the researcher has been transformed from interpreter to conduit for the production of videotape. This loss of interpretive contribution is the gravest in a move to video. It denies a nuanced cultural reading and analysis of consumer behavior (see McCracken, 1988; Sunderland and Denny, in press; Valentine, 1995).

We must acknowledge that respondents are performers, practicing culture with every gesture and emphasis – whether in a focus group, their home or producing video diaries. In asking them to participate in consumer research ventures, they are also our partners – as Scott’s or Roland’s diaries explicitly show – a role that qualitative research must acknowledge and

accept (Denny, 2002). In participating in the project, they are enacting and participating in popular culture. It is up to us to decode the performance.

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