

Chapter 21

Digital Icarus?

Negotiating the (Dis)Advantages of Video in Research Settings in the Digital Era

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ABSTRACT

Video's affordances can help researchers derive richer answers to a wider variety of questions than was once previously possible, especially when this medium leverages the networking capabilities of the Internet. However, uncritical use of video can exact significant costs, possibly jeopardizing research integrity. This chapter considers issues when using video recording for educational research. The first section discusses the practical advantages of using video in research and addresses concerns when collecting data. The second examines video within ethnographic contexts. It discusses video as a complement to participant observation and the author's use of a personally produced ethnographic film to elicit student affective response. The third discusses philosophical issues that contextualize visual media used within research. This includes the production of meaning by images, the impact of the mechanical reproduction of images, as well as using visual media to explore the perceived gap between objectivity and subjectivity.

INTRODUCTION

The medium is the message. This is merely to say that the personal and social consequences of any medium - that is, of any extension of ourselves - result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology (McLuhan, 1964, p. 8).

A professional colleague named Mariano¹ approached me about shooting a video on his behalf. He was planning to conduct a teacher professional development session and wanted to keep a permanent record of this mentoring work. Unfortunately, Mariano did not contact me early enough. I was already booked. The professional development session was scheduled the next day.

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After I shared the bad news, Mariano asked if I could teach him how to shoot his own video of these interactions with his in-service teachers. Before I could reply, he rhetorically inquired “Don’t you just press the red button?”

BACKGROUND

Endless Expansion? Diversity in Video Forms, Devices and Avenues for Sharing

Video is a powerful communications tool that has only gained in strength as it has become cheaper and simpler to use. Another trend that is contributing to its heightened power is the seemingly exponential increase in devices, such as smart phones, that can play increasingly diverse content. American television broadcasters made large profits in 2012. They were flooded with dollars from a deluge of presidential election advertisements as well as Olympics coverage – overall revenues increased 9.2 percent to \$52.95 billion (Groticelli, 2012). Internet-hosted video has also achieved mainstream status as high-bandwidth connections and video-enabled devices have proliferated. For example, the video-sharing website YouTube has become one of the most popular destinations on the Internet - over a billion unique users visit the site per month (YouTube, 2013). Netflix, a provider of on-demand media streamed through the Internet, grew to attract 33 million subscribers as of mid-March 2013 (Paskin, 2013).

But this expanding presence of video in our lives has neither been confined to the sphere of popular culture nor personal use. Video has increasingly started to encroach upon the educational realm, even at the tertiary level. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Harvard, Caltech, and the University of California, Berkeley, among others, are beginning to offer educational content online through massive open online courses (MOOCs)

frequently anchored by Internet lecture videos (Heller, 2013). Khan Academy has produced 4,100 short instructional videos to teach a wide variety of subject matter (Khan Academy, 2013) that have become increasingly popular (Noer, 2012; Cetta, 2012). Khan instructional videos have been viewed more than 200 million times (Noer, 2012). “TED Talks Education” is an expansion of the eponymous Internet video franchise with the Public Broadcasting Service directly into the educational field (PBS, 2013). Even websites affiliated with traditional university institutions that have explicit educational goals are beginning to experiment by hosting videos with the purpose of translating traditional academic research into more popular forms and extending their content and message beyond the academy. This includes such fare as video teasers of professors to promote the ideas within their research (EdLab, 2013a) as well as video and infographics that appeals to younger audiences (Youth and Media Lab, 2013).

A Self-Induced Problem: Taming a Visually-Based Communications Technology

Within traditional tertiary educational settings, video in the digital age has a number of affordances that promise to help academics begin finding richer answers to an even wider variety of research questions than was possible in the immediate past. For example, a prospective researcher interested in examining classroom-based discursive practices could use video recording to capture formal teacher-led instruction as well as more informal teacher-student, student-student exchanges. The worldwide networking capabilities of the Internet also promise to leverage the power of video in novel ways. Combining recorded video with widely-available computer-based media players like QuickTime, DVD players, and online streaming, educational researchers can review video artifacts of their work in a wide array of settings virtually

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