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Fabrication as Ethical Practice: Qualitative Inquiry in Ambiguous Internet Contexts

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> The process of analysis stretches far beyond the mere manipulation of data and even of the work of grounded theorizing, thick description, and the like. It resides in the reconstruction of a given social world or some key feature of it. … All scholars recognize that this process is not innocent.
>
> Atkinson and Delamont, 2005, p.834

> When you say knowledge is fabricated, you highlight the process of meaning-making, rather than hiding it with words like "discovery" or "realization." The ethical wager here is that in so doing, you invite others who feel excluded or not heard to make interventions in the process themselves.
>
> Senft, 2011

INTRODUCTION

Three recent events have compelled me to write about fabrication as a valuable and ethical tool within qualitative research. It began a few months ago when I mentioned in a conference presentation on ethical decision making that I had invented a dialogue in a research study to protect the privacy of participants. The responses were more polarized than I anticipated. Some colleagues were shocked at what they considered an unethical breach of social science practice: "How could you do such a thing? How can I trust what you say anymore?" Other colleagues were grateful for what they considered an ethical but oft-feared practice: "Thank you for finally uttering this aloud. We've been wanting to do this too."

Second, I learned that a publisher had rejected a paper written by two of my colleagues, solely on the claim that they were faking their data by presenting invented composite blogs instead of quoting directly from actual blogs.

Third, I started engaging in heated discussions about ethical practices of representation, arguing with colleagues about whether information collected in online social environments constituted public or private. As I and my colleagues continue to make arguments for one or the other side in this binary, users seem to be making more fine-tuned distinctions in their lived experience: privacy seems less about the information itself and more about the use or flow of that information.

I found myself asking: In comparing various spheres where cultural knowledge is produced, what is being constrained by current norms and practices of qualitative methods? Why do qualitative methods remain conservative while outside the walls of the academy, inventive, creative, and powerful forms of cultural analysis thrive? Are our methods still adequate, in contexts where our conventional norms for research require more and more exceptions and 'work-arounds?' How can we expand our working notion of credibility within Internet studies so that inventing a blog or dialogue within a study becomes acceptable practice?

In this paper I outline some of the ethical dilemmas associated with protecting participants in internet-based social contexts. I discuss the concept of fabrication in relation to current trends that signal a continuing or even growing conservatism in qualitative inquiry. I then offer an introductory framework for ethically sensible premises and practices for creative fabrication in data analysis and representation and provide suggestions for shifting methodological practice to better protect privacy in situations where vulnerability or potential harm is possible or not easily determined. This article is particularly targeted toward the study of sensitive topics or situations where personhood, privacy, vulnerability, and harm may be ambiguous.

'Fabrication' may seem an odd choice to readers familiar with the way this term has been commonly defined. Particularly in scientific communities in the United States, fabrication is considered a form of research misconduct, often connected with its sister term 'falsification.' I am choosing the term deliberately to interrogate and destabilize the mistaken and often unspoken assumption that invention necessarily represents a lack of integrity and likewise, that 'good' research includes no trace of fabrication. Using the term also helps to highlight the constructive aspects associated with interpretation, a crucial element and strength of qualitative inquiry. My hope in this article is to provide a much-needed framework for qualitative researchers who struggle with the ethical dilemma of adequately anonymizing information while providing accounts that present rich descriptions and important details about the context or people.

Privacy: An eroding and ambiguous concept

The capacities of the Internet make many things possible in social research but also reveal significant weaknesses in traditional methods we have used for qualitative research (Baym and Markham 2009). Of particular interest in this paper is the way that privacy, as related to the performance of self in online contexts, is conceptualized and protected by researchers.

Sociologists and journalists have long considered a person's words to be freely available-- if uttered publicly or with permission--to analyze and quote, as long as we anonymize the source. Researchers operating in physical environments traditionally took for granted the ability to safely store fieldnotes, interview transcripts, demographic data, and other information that might reveal the location of the study or the participants' identities.

These methods of data protection no longer suffice in situations where social researchers need to design studies, manage data, and build research reports in increasing public, archivable, searchable, and traceable spaces. More and more, data mining technologies are used to link participants to the information they produce and consume via a range of mobile devices, game consoles, and other internet-based technologies. In such research environments, there are few means of adequately disguising details about the venue and persons being studied. In decades prior to the Internet, sociologists often claimed that their research would be published in obscure journals, unlikely to catch the attention of the participants, general public or news media. The advent of the Internet, the rise of citizen journalism, and the possibility of global distribution of research findings have made this defense no longer viable.

Researchers struggling with the practical and methodological challenges surrounding the issue of privacy find themselves on constantly shifting conceptual terrain. Individual and cultural definitions and expectations of privacy are ambiguous, contested, and changing.

People may operate in public spaces but maintain strong expectations of privacy.[1] Or, they may acknowledge that the substance of their communication is public, but that the context defines it more than the technology. For example, youth interviewed by danah boyd and Alice Marwick (2011, p.6) felt angry that their Facebook information was used by teachers and administrators in a school-wide public presentation to illustrate the dangers of posting private information in public spaces. They knew the information was relatively public. It was the manner in which it was used that violated their expectations of privacy. In mediatized contexts, as Nissenbaum points out, "what people care most about is not simply restricting the flow of information but ensuring that it flows appropriately" (2010, Intro, para. 2).

As conversations and debates continue to rage across multiple spheres of interest, the challenge for qualitative researchers remains: While some media savvy participants, or what Senft (2008) has called "micro celebrities," may prefer that their publicity be protected and that researchers cite them accurately and fully, many more want the reverse. But what does this mean, if we cannot find consensus on what privacy means, much less how it is therefore 'protected?' The ambiguity of the meaning of privacy, harm, or vulnerability requires researchers to make informed decisions about their practice on a case-by-case basis. This aligns well with Nissenbaum's (2010) notion of contextual integrity, where parameters for understanding privacy requires attention to the gritty, concrete details of the specific situation in which there is a question.

From a pragmatic perspective, this is easier said than done, of course. To complicate matters further, as a lived concept, privacy is inextricable from its sister concepts: harm and vulnerability. To understand how potential research participants conceptualize one requires consideration of all three, separately and together, in context.

Examining the context can provide some information for the researcher to assess the extent to which privacy might become an issue, but there are situations where this cannot alleviate the dilemma. What may seem ephemeral or innocuous at one point in time might shift rapidly into something that causes real or perceived harm. Following information as it flows across multiple contexts, for example, may yield different assessments of privacy in each. For example, although I might willingly broadcast all my tweets to the public world at large, and would not mind my tweets being used in visual mapping of trends, I would feel violated to find all of my tweets—sent out in sporadic fashion, in an ephemeral sense, or over a long period of time—combined together and analyzed by a researcher. Despite the fact that users recognize the overtly public nature of their presentation of self via digital media, this has no universally agreed upon or <u>a priori</u> correspondence with the harm that might eventually be felt.

At least for the foreseeable near future, researchers must operate to flexibly adapt to continual shifts in perceptions, unstable terms of service, radically distinctive national and

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[1] This is widely discussed in ethics and Internet research literature. A particularly keen analysis appears in Sveningsson (2004), and is modified/expanded somewhat in McKee & Porter (2009). The ethical parameters for collecting information in online public spaces are ambiguous and contested. Hudson and Bruckman (2002) found that while it might be widely considered ethically acceptable to capture and analyze interactions and conversations in a public square without consent, this model did not match the expectations of their participants in real time chatrooms, who felt strongly that "one may not ethically record an otherwise ephemeral medium without consent from participants" (p.118). Bassett and O'Riordan (1999) note that this sort of mismatch can occur in many ways: In the same online space or in the same online group, some users may believe their words are important public documents and they should receive credit as authors while others might believe their contributions are private, deserving anonymity. Likewise, the service provider, operator of an online forum, or terms of service may state that the content is public, yet individuals perceive the space to be private. As Bruckman notes, privacy is a concept that must be attended by considerations of expectations (in Ess and the AOIR Working Committee 2002). Nissenbaum (2010) adds that contextual integrity is required when we no longer can assume a consensus about what privacy means as a lived concept.

cultural expectations for privacy, and still steady growth of Internet use. The point of this article is to offer mechanisms to protect privacy and publish findings about potentially sensitive situations when there are no definitive answers to difficult ethical questions. In such cases, I heed early warnings (e.g. King 1996) about unforeseen harms to participants and advocate adopting a bit of a worst-case scenario approach to finding solutions.

Before turning to some of these methods of flexible adaptation, which would include processes that could be easily described as fabrication, let me offer an assessment of why the idea of fabrication is so unsavory.

What's wrong with Fabrication?

Fabrication is a term often glossed as the opposite of truth-telling; the quintessential form of unethical research conduct. But when we remove the political baggage, fabrication represents the activity of combining, molding, and/or arranging elements into a whole for a particular purpose. Whether one is building ships, shaping metal for arrowheads, weaving a narrative, creating a documentary, or arranging data to make a particular point, the fabrication process is not value-laden in itself. It is only when fabrication is combined with deliberate ill intention, deception, self-serving motives, or political gain that it earns its contemporary pejorative connotations. In anthropological or postpositivist research arenas, fabrication is actually an apt description for a process of interpretation.

As mentioned at the outset of this article, two colleagues recently had their work rejected for publication on the grounds that they had fabricated their data. In point of fact, they did fabricate data for the written report. They had collected information from multiple youth bloggers who were engaged in high risk or illegal practices[2]. Rather than provide excerpts from actual blogs, the authors constructed carefully phrased blog entries that were representative of actual blogs. They chose this method of representation as a way of protecting the privacy of individuals, knowing that data mining software could easily trace the origins of any actually quoted material. When they explained their ethical decision making to the publisher, they were given the choice to provide a more 'accurate' rendering of the data or withdraw their publication from consideration. They elected to withdraw.

This case exemplifies a persistent normative standard for social science inquiry. Despite the influence of feminist, postmodern, social constructivist, or post positivist thinking, top-down models for social research continue to converge with hard science interpretations, creating an environment that continues to privilege conventional, standardized procedures for the proper conduct of research and form of writing research findings.

Sociologist Howard Becker (2007) describes this standardization as an organizational product of the academic institution. Standards make it easier for people to read, interpret, and apply the knowledge offered in a routinized representational format. Within this system, innovation is difficult because it goes against the grain (p.72-77). There are other reasons for a continued emphasis on traditional methods of representation: Declining pools of funding sources tend to eliminate 'softer' arts and humanities programs first. Using

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2 The authors of this study followed ethical research protocols as recommended by the Swedish Research Council, voluntarily submitting their research design for ethical review. Strong ethical components built into the design of the study included: Balancing the public nature of the blogs with the concept of perceived privacy; assessing the need for informed consent on a case-by-case basis; obtaining consent in appropriate ways when deemed necessary; assessing risks associated with researcher presence; and so forth. Their decision to fabricate composite accounts was grounded in an ethical assessment of potential harm.

empirically measurable evidence and working within standard scientific models more easily justifies research spending for querulous politicians and the public alike.

These are reasonable explanations, but nonetheless constitute a disservice to qualitative researchers, who often find themselves in situations where their choices seem limited and where innovation or working outside the box is discouraged or even punished. More, it remains difficult to find adequate guidelines for how one might do ethically based innovative research within interpretive epistemologies. As Lincoln (2005, p.166) notes:

> Guidelines as they are now deployed have failed to keep pace with developments in research methodologies, particularly qualitative and action research methodologies, with their high emphasis on collaboration between researchers and those researched, high levels of interactivity, and new mandates for a reformulated communitarian and democratic ethics in the field.

The disparity is not only embedded in the language but also in the content of regulatory guidelines. Even a brief perusal of three major governing and funding bodies in the United States illustrates this.

The National Research Council's (2002) report on scientific research on education, for example, lays out clear parameters for scientific inquiry that privilege empiricist and modernist methods to the exclusion and derision of alternatives. As Lincoln (2005) notes, though qualitative research may be allowed, there is a clear focus on objectivity and causal connections. Standards for assessing quality include those applied in conventional experimental methods, including internal validity, generalizability, and replicability. While alternative epistemologies might be used to produce scholarship, these are not considered scientific inquiry (p. 170-171). Though one might individually dismiss this report as simply one-sided, legislators and funding agencies rely on such reports to help them assess research proposals and select projects for funding across the U.S. (particularly in this case, research that might fall within No Child Left Behind legislation).

The National Science Foundation's requirements for management of data provide a clear and practical scheme for external review or reuse of raw data. Yet in spirit and wording, these parameters promote and assume a default epistemology of positivism and empiricism; researchers seeking to manage information they've collected outside the recommendations must argue well beyond the basics to effectively justify a different epistemological stance. Ethnographers using field journals and participant observation as grounding for their interpretations have long protected their information as confidential. The method of analysis is often considered 'mindwork' or 'interpretation'; findings are neither generalizable nor replicable. Uploading 'data' to a central repository so it can be shared and/or verified by third parties would be challenging if not unthinkable.

The U.S. Office of Research Integrity (ORI), located within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, supports education in the responsible conduct of research (RCR), through guidelines and compliance training for many academic institutions and research institutes. Swiftly becoming a standard for RCR training across the United States for students, teachers, and researchers, the rhetorical frames as well as primary examples are often couched within the premises and practice of the hard sciences and clinical research protocols, from which these guidelines emerged (Buchanan 2011).

These three examples are not isolated, but represent a common hegemonic discourse surrounding the conduct of science. In line with Becker's notion of organizational standardization, the models are institutionally directed and procedural. They work in opposition to creative and inductive methods associated with qualitative inquiry, which relies on the interpretive authority of the researcher functioning not only as a collector of data but also as a tool of analysis.

The consequence of this persistent discourse and standardization is an oversimplification of what constitutes ethical conduct. The ORI definition of misconduct can be found on their own website but also on the websites of at least 397[3] educational institutions in the U.S.:

> I. Research misconduct means fabrication, falsification, or plagiarism in proposing, performing, or reviewing research, or in reporting research results.
> - Fabrication is making up data or results and recording or reporting them.
> - Falsification is manipulating research materials, equipment, or processes, or changing or omitting data or results such that the research is not accurately represented in the research record.
> - Plagiarism is the appropriation of another person's ideas, processes, results, or words without giving appropriate credit.
> - Research misconduct does not include honest error or differences of opinion.
>
> (Steneck 2006)

To conceptualize fabrication as universally unethical relies on particular understandings of the relationship between the researcher and the data and what is meant by 'data.' If 'to fabricate' is to invent research data, it is understood that data exists before and outside the interference of the researcher. Collection and measurement tools should capture data in raw and complete form. If 'to fabricate' is to make up results, it is understood that data tells the story, through only the mediation of a hypothesis. In this process, the researcher's role is to measure the fit between the data and the hypothesis.

Put simply, the scientist is--or should be--a conduit for transmitting a description or explanation of this reality to the audience, using a strict interpretation of data through the lens created by the hypothesis. But these understandings of data and misconduct fall apart when researchers are working within non-positivist paradigms.

My goal here is not to debate the merits of the practices of empiricism or positivism. I seek to broaden our understanding of what might constitute ethical conduct in social research, which in turn can help us rethink the ways in which we may be misapplying the criteria of misconduct in those disciplines where other criteria apply. Misconduct is certainly a concern, but takes different shapes when one considers an interpretive understanding of inquiry, where there is a much different understanding of the relationship between the researcher and the data, what is meant by 'data,' and what is actually involved in the everyday performance of internet inquiry. Pushing aside the focus on misconduct can actually make room for a greater focus on contextual integrity.

Embracing Fabrication as a methodological framework

[3] This number is based on a single Google search for this definition within .edu domains, which yielded 397 results as of the date of this writing.

Fabrication of data is not new, in the sense that interpretive, postpositivist, postmodern, feminist, and performance scholars from a range of disciplines have long and persuasively held that the entire enterprise of social inquiry is one of invention with more or less degrees of systematicity, integrity and rigor. Using the term fabrication may seem deliberately provocative, but is actually a useful way of getting to the point that Senft (2011) makes in the quote at the beginning of this article.

Within fields that embrace dialogic meaning, 'data' include not only activities and artifacts observed or found in the field, but also those negotiated understandings derived from the researcher's own participation and presence. Boundaries are created as the researcher moves. Each logistical and methodological decision constitutes a choice with consequences: Each move influences the range of vision, the shape of the phenomenon, and the type and form of data through which a description or explanation of the phenomenon is developed. All data is narrowed, altered, and abstracted through various filters before it is analyzed. Research reports are partial accounts and snapshot versions of truth—our best effort to encapsulate for particular audiences the studied experience of everyday life.

On a very practical level, invention and/or fabrication is a sensible and ethically grounded solution for protecting privacy in arenas of shifting public/private contexts. It constitutes one of many creative means of embedding ethics inductively into research practice, by allowing the specific needs of the context to play a stronger role in determining 'best practice' procedures. In more plain terms, as stated by David Karp (in Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2011): "Everything we write is, in fact, a story we are telling. We are trying to tell a compelling story, but it is a story that is disciplined by your data. I mean, you just can't tell <u>any</u> story" (p.349).

Shifting to a position whereby fabrication comprises a rigorous model for analysis and representation involves reconsidering the relationship between the researcher, participant, and the construction of cultural knowledge. It asks one to move closer to, if not embrace fully, those epistemologies that have for many decades now explored these relationships, as well as the processes we use to conduct inquiry that stands alongside other scientific models, even as we understand "there are no objective observations, only observations socially situated in the worlds of—and between—the observer and the observed" (Denzin and Lincoln 2000, p.19).

Fabrication includes such practices as creating composite accounts of persons, events, or interactions, building fictional narratives, and using certain techniques associated with remix culture. Below, I outline briefly some of the ways I conceptualize these methods within an interpretive framework to offer some beginning guidance for those interested.

Composite Accounts

Creating a composite account is, on the surface, a straightforward activity of selecting representative elements from the data set and composing a new original that is not traceable back to the originals. This reconstruction is accomplished through careful attention to the context, the questions, and the purpose of the report. Understanding "there is no transparent medium through which a social world can be represented" (Atkinson and Delamont 2005, p.834), the conventions we use to convey our knowledge are selections, whether or not we are aware we are selecting anything. These choices can change over time as the researcher adapts to changes in readership, media for possible reporting, and the contexts within which one is conducting research. Composite accounts are simply a useful adaptation to the current concerns about privacy and anonymity in internet-related social spaces.

Events

There is great benefit in relaying the wonder, curiosity, or just rich humanity of an event. Specific details of a particular event, on a particular date and time, may be crucial if the event itself is notorious. But these instances are rare. Take for example Julian Dibbell's (1993) classic, visceral description of the moment when one persona took over the identity of another's in an online community and proceeded to violate a third persona. Even in this pivotal case, the details could have been recreated to make the same point he did about the actuality of lived experience in virtual space.[4]

The value of composite accounts of events lies in the ability to combine instances from several perspectives or from several similar events to present a 'typical' or 'ideal type' description for readers. One might present the typical turn-taking conversation that occurs when a student complains to a teacher about a grade he or she received, which can help illustrate the humor or embarrassment in such exchanges. The intent of such accounts is generally to convey a detailed description of the typical scenario, so that the reader will come away with a vivid comprehension of the way it feels to be there, and possibly a closer connection to the field, the participants, and the researcher.

In sensitive, risky, or illegal situations, a composite event is one of the only ways to present and explore details that, if linked to particular identities or locations, might cause harm or retribution.

People

Creating composites of persons is actually a common practice in sociology and anthropology, particularly in situations where the participant may be engaged in risky behavior. In such cases, it is useful to construct the research questions so that the phenomenon is the object of study, not the person him or herself. Mentioned at the outset of this article, Ikonomis Svedmark (2011) discusses the practice of creating composite blogs of youths engaged in risky or sensitive activities. To diminish the potential harm to vulnerable participants, she and her colleague constructed fictional blog entries to convey a depiction of these youth who blog about suicide, anorexia, cutting, or other extreme behaviors.

Interactions

Composite interactions are derived via the same process as composite persons. Conveying meaningful dialogues is a rich form of presenting both what happens in the research context and what it means. Dialogues can be the vehicles for presenting 'findings,' or they can lie alongside more conventional forms of argument.

Inventing dialogues from memory has been a longstanding practice of anthropologists. Now, however, our ability to record and archive in digital form every moment of every interaction beguiles us into thinking that these recordings must be reproduced in some intact form for our audiences or worse, that they represent the only authentic voice in the telling of the ethnographic story. In the digital age, we trust our memories less and less, to the point that

[4] My point is not about this specific case and I am not claiming that this scenario should have been transformed into a composite account. Any decision about whether to use direct quotes or an invented account would require consideration of multiple factors.

we may be inadvertently mistrusting the key role of 'interpretation' as a methodological tool.

Like other composite accounts, dialogues that resonate with the experience of the reader are likely to be considered more credible than if they ring false. This resonance must be both in content and tone. For example, in a conference some years back, a researcher presented a creative dialogue between herself and a male abuser. The research was compelling for some, but I didn't believe a word of it because the presenter used a southern accent to vocalize the inflection and tone of two people from Wyoming, where people do not speak with anything resembling a southern accent. Whether or not the dialogue was firmly grounded in data, the representation (in this case, oral performance) did not resonate with my long-term experience of this region.

Process

There are also composite treatments of style, as when one is exploring the form or style of writing, presentation of self, interaction modes and forms, and various negotiation processes. Describing typical Google search processes for different age groups, a researcher can render meaningful patterns found in the course of analysis without revealing the actual practice of an individual. Detailing the routine aspects of Newbies entering a virtual environment for the first time can help illustrate patterns associated with socialization routines, identify key glitches in user interface, or provide a rich and colorful sense of presence for unfamiliar readers.

For example, intensive analysis of individual twitter activities of on-the-ground activists during the Egyptian uprising of early 2011 yields a strong patterns of viral information flow, as well as emotional waves of shock, loss, grief, and elation. Arguably, even if not experiencing any of the activities and emotions personally, I should be able to become informed enough to rewrite a twitter flow that conveys a verisimilitude of this experience. In a way, the analyst uses some of the techniques associated with method acting. Importantly, this method of analytical representation is designed to unfocus from the individual and refocus on the patterns—those discursive activities that, when experienced live, speak to more than the specific content.

In all of these forms of composite accounts, interpretive integrity is linked with the qualitative researcher's in-depth connection to the phenomenon and/or the participants. Time 'in the field' is generally significant. Analysis is lengthy and intense. These features of qualitative research practice are necessary to build questions inductively, construct grounded theory, or to cull important knowledge from a vast array of data collected in situ.

There are some limitations to be aware of when writing composite accounts. The strength of case studies, ethnographies, and interview studies often lies in rich descriptions of actual accounts. When presenting composite accounts, one can overlook variation or diminish distinctions in favor of providing a generality. One can also lose the sense of participants as real individuals with unique personalities. On the opposite end of the spectrum, one can create an idealized version or one that is too clean and tidy, which may not resonate with the actualities of the individual or event.

While these limitations are important considerations, it remains clear that all forms of writing are a process of abstraction from the reality of lived experience. Even as the study begins, we start to filter the phenomenon, focus in particular directions, and make choices that will influence the outcomes. This is a natural part of inquiry. Actually, creating composite accounts is a good way to emphasize what is crucial about this phenomenon and to render the essence of the findings in ways that both give fidelity to the participants in context and illuminate the key elements of one's findings.

Fictional Narratives

In describing the value of narratives as a method of generating data as well as presenting research, Dawson (2007, p.84) notes that despite the Latin derivation of the term (to know):

> A narrative is not a set of facts that purports to represent knowledge or 'truth.' Rather, a narrative aims to portray in a rich and compelling way the problematic nature of life (including research). A narrative is an expression of our lived experience. It is concerned, not with facts, but with plausibility.

Narrative has a long tradition in cultural research and there are many contested formats (Van Mannen 1988). Whether constructed within realist, confessional, impressionist, critical, or other frameworks, the goal is to rethink either the goal of inquiry or, in a less drastic conceptual move, how one represents fieldwork, persons, or contexts. Narrative in the sense that I discuss it here is not just a way of thinking about rendering one's results, but a way of embracing the agency of the researcher in this process, by first claiming and then actively enacting one's role as editor, translator, and indeed, the fabricator of the story.

On the realist end of the spectrum, narratives strive to be as close as possible to the lived experience of the participants, often told by a narrator who seeks to maintain some objective distance, as was often the case in traditional ethnographies, but not necessarily (see for example Mary Catherine Bateson's exemplary *Composing a Life*). Attempting to remain distant can be risky. Being intimately involved in the research yet absenting oneself from the tale can ring false to readers.

Confessional tales include, if not focus on, the researcher's craft and influence in the course of the study. The analytical and interpretive decisions are made transparent in this type of narrative, which in the best renderings allows the reader to gain a rich perspective on the phenomenon as well as the position of the researcher. Often this type of inquiry is mislabeled 'autoethnography' because both include attention on the self as researcher. However, one can include the self in the rendering without the self being the center of attention or the sole object of analysis.

Impressionist tales are those wherein "cultural knowledge is slipped to an audience" in poetic, fragmented, dramatic, or startling ways (Van Mannen, 1988, p.104). Designed to provide experiential engagement with some aspect of the phenomenon more than to present the results of a fact finding mission, this narrative form can be useful when trying to reach an audience that may have little comprehension of one's context under study, or when the goal need not align with traditional scientific reporting.

While there is no exact approach to the use of narrative elements, Richardson's (1993; 2005) work on writing as inquiry offer some strategies to develop a more narrative style in the presentation of findings, or to use narrative as a form of analysis. I synthesize here to present these most relevant to the study of digital media:

Layered accounts

Write a 'layered text'; a strategy for inserting voice from participants, the researcher, and theory in the same storyline. Each layer functions as a comment on or response to other layers, so that the perspectives remain separate, but together build an argument. The result may be cohesive, or it may be fragmented in style, which can be useful if the findings are emotionally difficult, multi-layered and disparate, or if the context or phenomenon is chaotic and a too-polished account would not represent the reality of the phenomenon. Ronai's (1995) account of child sex abuse is a classic example that demonstrates both the need and accomplishment of this type of research narrative.

For example, to convey the complication of meaning in a study of the expression "Go Ugly Early," I layered multiple voices, each presenting a different perspective on the phenomenon (Markham 2005). I wrote fictional scenes based on my observations, including fictional, but representational dialogue of participants. I included exact transcripts of other participants I had interviewed. I included excerpts from my own research diary and quotes from other scholars. Layering the personal with the theoretical explanation was an effort to destabilize authoritative meaning and give voice to multiplicity, but to also provide an evocative account.

Drama

Transform 'data' into a drama, with characters, action, and plot. Experiment with different character types or tones to find fidelity with the characteristics of actual participants. Add the researchers' voice, perhaps as the detective in the story, as Goodall did in a classic ethnographic work about organizational life (1989).

For example, a fictionalized narrative can dramatize how individuals or communities are affected by the loss of Internet or phone access during a disaster. Not only can this type of dramatic rendering bring vivid clarity to the experience, but it can also be used to make arguments about the centrality of technology in everyday life.

Conversations and Dialogues

Write in-depth interviews as conversations in a novel or screenplay. This method can give more life to an interview transcript but can also be used as a process of analysis. What seems a static representation of a monologue in a conventional research report can be more clearly identified as a messy or contextualized conversation. This is useful to help include relevant elements that might otherwise absent from the rendering. Including details of the persons involved—scratching of the head, nervous posturing, boredom, long pauses—can add lend crucial meaning to the analysis. Including physical surroundings or a stark lack thereof can help give more richness to the context in which the conversation occurred. If the conversation happened via digital media, these characteristics can be built into the conversation as well, to lend a sense of the situation for readers. This type of narrative account is also useful for including the researcher as an active participant in the dialogue, which can add context for readers.

All of these techniques give richness to an account while removing individual identifiers. At the same time, it is not feasible to write about one's colleagues down the hallway or members of your own raiding guild in an MMORPG and expect them to remain blind to the fact that you have written about them. There may be other solutions in such situations, such as shifting one's question so that the study does not need to focus on individuals or specific groups.

Engagement occurs at multiple levels when we experience narrative. As a tool of persuasion, narrative functions more at the level of pathos and ethos than logos. The criteria for assessing the credibility of narrative include verisimilitude, coherence, and interest (Guba and Lincoln 1989; Richardson 1993; Richardson, 2000). Would the rendering 'ring true' for participants or people familiar with the context or phenomenon? Does the narrative seem plausible? If not, has the researcher provided good evidence to demonstrate the veracity of the details or the rigor of the method of collecting and analyzing information? Does the story hang together logically? Is it compelling?

If the goal is engagement versus transmission, the possibilities for creative production blossom. Narrative is intended to transform readers or to make them think more fully or differently about the phenomenon. As such, it is best considered not a strategy but a stance for the function and conduct of inquiry. Nonetheless, as with composite accounts, the style can be used as a mode of representation only, one that removes personal identifiers but captures the rich essence of the context as experienced by the researcher.

Fabrication within a model of interpretive authority

What gives an invented, subjective account credibility? Another way to ask this question is to ask: What do qualitative researchers do in practice that would give an invented, fabricated research report interpretive authority?

The process of qualitative inquiry is deceptively straightforward, if only appraised at the surface of activity. Research is conducted in naturalistic settings, by observing and participating in cultural practices and interacting with others formally or informally so as to gain a deep rich understanding of meaning-in-context. The analytical and writing practices required to render what Geertz classically labeled 'Thick Description' necessarily involve transforming fieldnotes, interview transcripts, and various artifacts collected throughout the study into something else. Practically speaking, qualitative materials are messy and vast. They might include direct quotes from participants, recorded and transcribed using strict conventions. They might also include recollection of a conversation or event, the details of which are scribbled on a napkin after the fact. A coffee stain on the page of a research diary might jar a key memory loose, as ethnographers interviewed by Jackson (1990) describe. Conceptually speaking, this means that the researcher must take seriously the role of cultural interpreter, and gain interpretive authority through rigorous and constant practice of their craft.

The strength of interpretive qualitative research has never been in the direct transfer of meaning experienced <u>in situ</u> to a reader of a scholarly text. Rather, its power emerges from evocative renderings of the human condition, created by the researcher as artist or storyteller. Qualitative methods allow access to an intensely personal, subjective experience of others' cultural practices, which may or may not become one's own. Saturated and embedded in the richness of everyday life, a scholar attempts to both be in the moment and outside the moment, oscillating between the dual roles of observer and participant.

Particularly when using deliberately fabricative methods, one way to demonstrate the rigor of the analysis is to build transparency into the account, which may include the following:

- Identify and describe the steps of sensemaking from raw experience to final argument. Describing the development of relevant questions, walking readers through decision-making processes, and including samples of analytical reasoning helps to demonstrate interpretive competence. It also walks the audience through one's logic, rather than assuming the reader would follow that same path of reasoning.
- Show, rather than tell. Whenever possible, provide rich descriptions and samples of dialogue and interactions. Because these may include composite accounts,

- Make the researcher's role visible in the field and the analytical process of transforming social experience into an audience-specific audience. This alleviates the pressure to provide an omnipotent report of the whole and clarifies the notion that the research findings are a product of one's participation and choices; a selection from a range of possible options in writing culture.
- Defend the researcher's authority by offering examples of how experience transforms into findings, or how data is (re)fabricated without loss of fidelity. Creating strong connections between discursive practices and findings is not automatic, but designed through careful and reflexive analytical procedures. Demonstrating these with specific examples is like showing the steps in math homework. It helps the audience accept that your rendering is viable.

Being considered credible is a slightly different consideration, a measure granted from the outside based on any number of known and unknown criteria. It may be worth noting that credibility for any audience is gained in multiple ways, including the preexisting credibility one brings to the table (age, expertise, previous research); the credibility one builds in the presentation (making claims that are well supported through evidence or reasoning; citing other sources to bolster one's own claims); and the credibility one gains by being charismatic or likeable (e.g., if the manner of writing resonates with the expectations of the audience; if one demonstrates respect for the norms and expectations of the audience or for the object/culture being studied; if one's rendering is particularly compelling across many audiences; or if one is generally a likeable sort of person and this comes through in the writing).

Conclusion: Fabrication in a remix culture

The notion of fabrication lies within a greater consideration of how we produce knowledge in a mediatized, multiphrenic culture. Outside the walls of academia, innovative forms of critical thinking and scholarship thrive. With new technologies to play with, new technologies to distribute playful creations or provide immersive experiences for others, and an open source attitude, we're witnessing different modes of knowledge production based on experimentation, necessary (or inherent to the technologies) collaboration, creative ingenuity, and remix. We see analyses that merge cultural critique and creative expression. We learn from an array of stories that cut across social demographics, which in their very creation and viral dissemination problematize the privilege of the professions of science, journalism, or art.

The model of credibility within this new(ish) public intellectual sphere is reputation based, where the product or the producer is judged by a crowd. In most cases the crowd is not unruly, but a smart mob, expert en masse in the particular knowledge arena, defined by their willingness and ability to correct each other in a collective assessment of the community's product(s).

This collaborative correction mechanism is combined with a collaborative model for what counts as worthwhile: What is salient, meaningful, or true is not necessarily determined by unknown expert sources but derived from a groundswell of attention and again, crowd sourced judgment. Of course this can be good or bad, depending on how you want to see the world. From my perspective, this process yields on the one hand Jon Stewart as one of the most credible political commentators in the U.S. (a good thing) and on the other hand, a groundswell effort to deny that global warming exists (a bad thing).

If lived experiences in online social environments like Second Life, MMORPGs, or less dramatically, Facebook, Twitter, and email has taught us anything, it is that terms like 'real' or 'virtual' are not significant separators of experience. Experience is more real if it is meaningful. Authenticity is measured in the same way. Salience is an ad hoc, temporal, contextualized sort of truth. This isn't such a bad thing. It also doesn't mean everything goes, or that every telling is equal. It just destabilizes a sense of truth and reality as something that exists prior to our acknowledgment and assessment of it as such.

Instead of focusing on the elusive, if not impossible, task of discovering the right answer, which may yield only endless frustration, one can change the question, tilt the perspective: 'What does it mean in this context, for these people?' or 'How is this experienced?' or 'How might it function?" Answering these questions while calling oneself a scientist involves many things, not the least of which is trusting one's interpretive strengths and engaging in an act of interpretive authority. After all, as Bud Goodall (2003) reminds us, this is what qualitative researchers are trained to do.

Every qualitative study is a systematic exploration of cultural information to identify patterns, follow them, connect these patterns to larger sensitizing constructs, and eventually make a meaningful statement about it to a larger audience. Qualitative inquiry that restricts itself to a correspondence theory of meaning or the idea that it is possible to represent reality accurately in our research reports holds to an illusion and misses the point. As Goodall (2000, p.55) notes, "All representations are partial, partisan, and problematic." Our research may be a representation of reality, "but reality is far more complex—more full, more radically diverse, and more whole—than any representation of it."

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