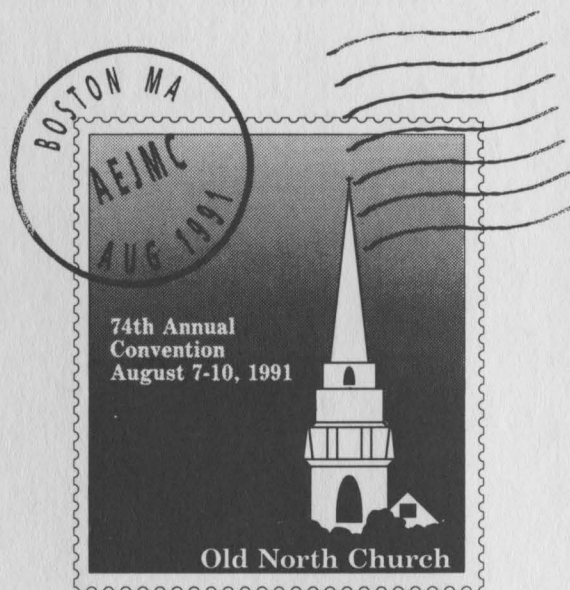


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*Dedicated to Research in Journalism and Mass Communication*

Number 125

February 1991

## A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO DOING QUALITATIVE RESEARCH IN MASS COMMUNICATION

JOHN J. PAULY

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## JOHN J. PAULY

### A Beginner's Guide To Doing Qualitative Research In Mass Communication

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## FOREWORD

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH can baffle the outsider. Two attitudes seem to prevail — a hostility, based in a mistrust of what seems to be “soft” or “subjective” in qualitative methods, and a naive hope, based in an impression that this kind of research (unlike “real” research) will be easy, even fun. Those of us who teach qualitative methods find we must address both this hostility, and this hope, in our students. To us, qualitative research is neither the vague and fuzzy enterprise imagined by the hostile, nor the carefree romp envisioned by the hopeful.

In representing qualitative research, we try, often unsuccessfully, to demystify qualitative methods, while still remaining true to the richness and complexities of the perspective. We strive to explain qualitative research without dismissing the concerns of the hostile, or crushing the dreams of the hopeful.

This is not an easy task. Students often ask for simple, concrete procedures — “How exactly do you do qualitative research?” To offer a “research recipe” is to falsify the multiple layers and interactive processes of qualitative inquiry. Yet to insist that there can be no recipe is to seem to intentionally mystify the process, or to anoint the already-initiated — both antithetical to the goals of qualitative research. In short, it is difficult to construct, or to find in the literature, an account of qualitative research that thoughtfully, fairly, and accessibly describes how qualitative inquiry proceeds.

That is what is so extraordinary about the essay that follows. It is an account of qualitative methods that remains true to qualitative inquiry, because it does not reduce the process to some simple set of procedures. Yet it still offers the novice a trajectory of inquiry which, simultaneously, considers the motives and purposes that inform that trajectory. It describes research as an ongoing process of discovering, questioning, describing, rediscovering — a process that has regularity, pattern, and coherence, but no absolute rules, and no ultimate guarantees.

John Pauly offers a sensitive and rich description that demonstrates, in its style and structure, the very best aspects of the qualitative perspective. He takes as his focus mass communication scholarship, showing how definitions of communication as meaning-making, rather than information transferral, underlie qualitative perspectives in communications research. By noting the different “lenses” on the communication process — product, practice, and commentary — he delineates broad categories of qualitative inquiry that currently figure in media study.

In describing steps in the research process, the author directly addresses the most confusing, and misunderstood, aspects of the qualitative enterprise. Of concern to novices are issues like: how, in the



qualitative tradition, are questions formulated, categories of evidence defined, findings analyzed, results reported? In American social science, there are established procedures for hypothesis formulation and testing, the delimiting and analysis of data, and the reporting of results. By contrast, qualitative researchers, to both hostile and hopeful observers, seem to be aimlessly muddling along. Can this really constitute competent, trustworthy research?

What John Pauly describes is a process that is trustworthy because it is not aimless muddling, but careful and coherent inquiry. As he describes the qualitative approach, research questions are developed in relation to perceived wholes, not independent and subject variables; evidence is open-ended, rather than preselected by particular techniques; analytic procedures are interpretive, not statistical; findings are consciously narrativized, not neutrally "reported;" and knowledge is always assumed to be partial and illuminative, rather than complete and cumulative.

This final characteristic is perhaps the most troubling to outsiders. To do qualitative research is to accept the inevitably incomplete nature of human knowledge. This is difficult because it requires the abandonment of a position as privileged "knower." The researcher listens, absorbs, retells, but does not, and cannot, offer some ultimate and final "true" account of the world. To accept the qualitative position is to believe that our understandings of the world are always partial and contingent, dependent on circumstances we can never fully apprehend, or control.

Because of this, qualitative research tends to be modest, personal, even intimate; it offers a research path, rather than access to some underlying "really real;" it represents a process of scrutiny and interpretation, rather than statistical analyses; it creates a story based in evidence, rather than a report of absolute proof. Qualitative research is always in process. Once entered into, qualitative research offers opportunities to explore the world in which we live, in and through the terms by which we live in it.

This means that qualitative research is, by its nature, a collaborative enterprise. As this account demonstrates, it invites conversation, continuation, reinterpretation and therefore, participation. This participation requires, however, understanding the nature and trajectory of qualitative methods. Such an understanding must shed the hostility born of mistrust, and the naïveté born of hopefulness. John Pauly's essay offers the possibility of such an understanding, and is a very welcome addition to our field.

*Joli Jensen*

Department of Radio-Television-Film  
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## A Beginner's Guide to Doing Qualitative Research in Mass Communication

OVER THE LAST 20 YEARS mass communication research has often taken the interpretive turn — toward problems of meaning and qualitative methods, away from problems of causation and statistics.<sup>1</sup> Students looking to take that turn in their own research often lose their way, however. Because it has stitched together techniques borrowed from sociology, anthropology, rhetoric, literature, and art history, qualitative research may seem to lack any whole, coherent pattern. Moreover, while experienced researchers repeatedly defend their philosophical assumptions, they rarely explain their actual methods in much detail. How, for example, do qualitative researchers choose a topic for study, decide what will count for evidence, write up their results, or assess their own or others' work?

This essay demystifies the methods of qualitative research. My intent is to guide the work of beginners — advanced undergraduate and graduate students who wish to conduct qualitative research in mass communication, and professors trained in quantitative methods who want to try something different. I will show how qualitative researchers puzzle out the million-and-one practical problems of a study. Along the way I will also respond to the criticisms commonly lodged against qualitative research, such as its apparent acceptance of personal bias in observation and coding, its disorderly methods of data collection, its lack of broadly generalizable results, and its indifference to replication.<sup>2</sup> In comparing qualitative and quantitative approaches to research, I will argue that competent qualitative research attends to the world quite closely and is thus fully empirical, despite its refusal to conceptualize that world as "data."

Having warned the foes of qualitative research, I now hope to defend myself from my friends. For some qualitative researchers today, particularly those influenced by poststructuralist literary theory, lucidity is a social stigma, a public confession of epistemological naïveté, or, at worst, a foul act of authorial domination, committed in the name of "common

sense." I will nonetheless keep my explanations simple, if only to insure that both I and the reader know what I am talking about. My approach may also prove unsatisfying to those who prefer to drink their theory neat. My emphasis on research as a social practice may water down theoretical distinctions others deem crucial (or at least indispensable to their own identities as theoreticians). I do not wish to dismiss theoretical subtleties, in a chummy American fashion, by insisting that all qualitative researchers, in essence, work toward the same end. They do not, and deep readers may take pleasure in deciphering my own theoretical preferences, written firmly between the lines.

What follows is a step-by-step explanation of how one might do qualitative research. I do not claim that each step stands alone, or that the steps fall in exactly this order (though presumably all researchers do well to study the world a bit before they come to conclusions about it). I have avoided terms that too insistently echo particular theories, be they from phenomenology or the philosophy of science. The steps simply convey my own rough-and-ready sense of the significant moments in the research process. Finally, my model applies mostly to one genre of qualitative research: the single, well-defined project, such as one finds in a doctoral thesis. Experienced researchers work in many other genres as well — the literature review, the review-essay, the theoretical statement, the methodological critique — each with its own aesthetic and methods.

### *Step One: Finding a Topic*

To decide on a topic, the novice must recognize what types of questions qualitative research can answer. In brief: qualitative studies investigate meaning-making. Qualitative researchers would hurry to add, of course, that meaning, rather than effects, influences, functions, or information, is *the* fundamental problem of communication.<sup>3</sup> This attention to meaning derives from three philosophical assumptions:

1) Humans are creatures who symbolize. Like other animals, humans communicate; unlike other animals, humans also engage in endless talk about their talk. Culture — the whole ensemble of meaning-making practices — constitutes a second nature without which humans as a species could not survive.<sup>4</sup>

2) Humans fabricate rather than discover reality. They use symbols to construct the worlds in which they live. In this view, reality is an accomplishment rather than an entity out there, waiting to be uncovered.

3) Symbolic acts are public and social, not merely private and individual. Only by and in communicating do groups recognize themselves as groups and enact their distinctive styles of being in the world.<sup>5</sup>

Applied to mass communication, these assumptions call attention to how groups use cultural artifacts to assert and sustain a version of reality, articulate and celebrate a sense of identity, and disguise or flaunt

***Many mass communication researchers continue to trace messages from senders to receivers, through an ever more elaborate maze of circles, boxes, and arrows.***

styles of domination and control. The study of such symbolic practices constitutes the distinctive domain of qualitative research.<sup>6</sup>

Working under the rubric of communication as symbolic action, how can a novice identify an appropriate topic for research? The typical advice is to tell the researcher to find a niche in some existing theoretical literature. Later I will discuss the role that the literature review plays in qualitative studies. For now I will simply note that existing theoretical models of communication often prove only marginally relevant to qualitative research. In Harold Lasswell's classic formulation, mass communication research investigates who says what in which channel to whom with what effect.<sup>7</sup> Many mass communication researchers continue to trace messages from senders to receivers, through an ever more elaborate maze of circles, boxes, and arrows. Successive generations of researchers have chosen one or another stage of that model, studying senders' persuasive strategies, or the effect of different message structures on receivers' responses, or the amount of information that receivers acquire from different media, or the psychological functions satisfied by media use, or the consequences of sending messages through different channels.

For some groups posing some kinds of questions, such models serve well enough. But for the qualitative researcher, those models reduce communication to the transmission of a pre-existent message. That transmission model, as James Carey has called it, conceives of communication as a sequence of individual message transactions.<sup>8</sup> But qualitative researchers want to study the shared systems of meaning that render individual messages intelligible. The transmission model imagines communication as a discrete act of purposive behavior. Qualitative researchers argue that humans, by their nature, never stop communicating, so that the term *communication* most usefully describes the symbolic processes by which humans constantly reorient themselves to the world. Finally, the transmission model segregates senders and receivers. Qualitative researchers recognize the value of separating producers and audiences for some forms of analysis, but emphasize that senders and receivers compete and collaborate in constructing reality.

Given the awkwardness and inflexibility of schematic models of communication, novice researchers need rules of thumb for identifying an appropriate research topic. The literature of qualitative research offers some hints. Experienced qualitative researchers often choose to study mass communication in one of three ways: as a *product*, as a



*practice*, or as a *commentary*.<sup>9</sup> The very best research often integrates all three forms of analysis. These three terms do not constitute a theory of communication, nor do they imply a necessary progression from last to first, bottom to top, or outside to inside. Rather they operate as a cinematic metaphor for the research process. Each offers a lens through which to examine the scene of communication as it is played out. Each term provides its own take on humans' acts of meaning-making, a chance to rehearse the possibilities of different styles of understanding.

Researchers of all sorts treat mass communication as a *product* whenever they examine media artifacts such as news stories, television shows, records, films, or magazine advertisements. The qualitative researcher hopes to decipher the symbolic forms by which those artifacts render experience. Though such product studies may at first seem to resemble older message studies, such as content analysis, there is a crucial difference. The qualitative researcher does not search the materials for a clear message, moral, or value, but interprets them as texts, that is, as more or less integrated strategies of symbolic action. Later I will illustrate my own method of interpreting media artifacts as texts. For now I will only note that reading a media product as a text means something much more than coding it for the presence of certain topics, phrases, or themes.<sup>10</sup>

Because mass communication relies on industrial modes of production, media artifacts need to be studied as economic commodities, too. Economic analysis invites the researcher to suspend, for a moment, any discussion of a product's content. Such contentless analysis may call attention to technologies of production and reception, patterns of monopoly and competition, questions of pricing, marketing, sales, or distribution — in short, to all the strategies and behaviors economists normally investigate.

But in order to explain how economic, bureaucratic, and professional constraints shape the cultural form of a product, the qualitative researcher must treat mass communication as a *practice*. The term *practice* emphasizes cultural processes rather than products. To study practice is to recognize that groups or societies habitually organize and institutionalize the meaning-making process. Any single media product is, to some extent, only one outcome of producers' ongoing practices of meaning-making. Groups such as scriptwriters, producers, composers, art directors, station managers, disk jockeys, photographers, reporters, and editors collaborate over and over to create "new" products. Thus, studies of practice could focus on how media professionals perform their

***Reading a media product as a text means something much more than coding it for the presence of certain topics, phrases, or themes.***

cultural work, how the quest for profit drives media organizations toward (or away from) certain topics, how bureaucratic hierarchy creates artistic consensus, or how professional values inspire practitioners to resist or modify organizational imperatives. Researchers can also study the cultural practices of readers, viewers, and listeners, who work media products into their everyday lives.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, products and practices offer the raw materials, occasions, and metaphors for *commentaries* on mass communication. Apart from any message it conveys, a "medium" may offer itself as a useful thing to think with, as when social critics equate rock 'n' roll music with a breakdown of adolescent morals, or editors condemn the decline in newspaper readership as a sign of political apathy.<sup>12</sup> In other words, groups talk through the mass media in two senses — they send messages to one another, of course, but they also invoke "the media" in order to size up the shape, character, and direction of society itself.<sup>13</sup> By analyzing such commentaries, researchers can show how public controversies over mass communication often articulate wider disputes over cultural style.<sup>14</sup>

Let me emphasize again that this product-practice-commentary heuristic is not a full-blown theory of mass communication. These terms merely attempt to discern the common concerns of diverse styles of qualitative research. This heuristic best serves the practical needs of the qualitative researcher who needs a place to start, a way to identify a topic and appropriate methods. Using these terms a novice might begin thus: Is mine to be a study of some media products themselves? Or of the practices by which those products are made? Or of the commentaries groups offer about a medium's technology, personalities, institutions, content, or effects?

### *Step Two: Formulating Research Questions*

Qualitative researchers work systematically, though not necessarily by observing the methodological rituals of quantitative research. Qualitative researchers do not object to statistics (an abstract symbolic system that can be attached to any appropriate universe of objects), but to the interpretive acts by which quantitative researchers sometimes truncate reality to make it amenable to statistical manipulation. Such methodological disagreements often appear most strikingly in an article's introduction, where the quantitative researcher defines the domain of study, or in its conclusion, where the researcher returns from the language of statistics to the discourse of everyday life. In particular, qualitative researchers rework or qualify three standard procedures widely found in quantitative studies: the specification of subject and independent variables, the operational definition of key terms, and the construction of research hypotheses.<sup>15</sup>

Quantitative researchers typically assume cause-effect models of human behavior. In particular they hope to discriminate between multiple variables as possible causes of behaviors, attitudes, or cognition.

The quantitative researcher initially distinguishes subject variables or organismic variables — those attributed as unproblematically inherent in a thing, such as demographic categories like age, sex, income, or educational level — from independent variables — those officially created by the researcher as part of the experimental condition.

Qualitative researchers argue that the distinction between subject and independent variables can seriously mislead us. Variables never stand apart from some discourse that inflects presumably fixed categories such as age, income, or gender with meaning. Subject variables are merely those that the quantitative researcher decides to take for granted rather than fully explicate. For the qualitative researcher, social groups cannot be comprehended as statistically precise aggregates — here an old age/low income/frequent media user; there a middle age/medium income/high information-seeking user — but only through the symbolic dramas by which groups articulate and integrate those demographic identities.

On similar grounds the qualitative researcher rejects operational definitions. Quantitative researchers operationally define their key terms of analysis, in order to make possible a consistent, valid coding system, which, in turn, makes possible the application of appropriate statistical techniques. This method troubles the qualitative researcher, for it deliberately distances the researcher's language of analysis from the subject's language of experience.<sup>16</sup> Quantitative researchers sometimes recognize this problem, and start with open-ended interviewing and observation (classic qualitative techniques) in order to discover appropriate terms of analysis before setting up formal interview schedules or writing survey questions.

But a provocative issue remains: operational definitions demand consistency of denotation and absence of connotation. The language of everyday life, however, is lushly metaphorical, wildly contradictory, willfully connotative, and cynically strategic. What can researchers hope to know of human communication if their methods ban the play of meanings? Consistency of definition is its own virtue in the abstract terms that researchers themselves introduce, such as *culture*, *class*, *ideology*, or *symbol*. Nevertheless the researcher cannot simply replace or supersede the terms by which groups understand themselves. For instance, a qualitative researcher investigating the meaning of press freedom would be less interested in defining the essence of that freedom than in describing the diverse situations that call forth versions of that idiom from journalists — in court, to justify their access to government docu-

***For both quantitative and qualitative researchers, a literature review maps the discourse of the field.***

ments; in the tavern, to commiserate over an editor's refusal to run their stories; at a public banquet, to proclaim their devotion to professional virtue. Some definitions of press freedom might be used more frequently than others, a theme I will return to shortly, but no definition is inherently more real than others.

Finally, it is difficult in qualitative research to specify hypothetical statements that the research intends to test. The philosophy of science, by which social scientists imagine their work as scientific, treats research hypotheses as a crucial step in the creation of knowledge. Knowledge, according to that fable, is an edifice. It begins with small, precisely carved concepts that are cemented together into larger propositions and theoretical structures. The embarrassing fact is that no actual system of scientific knowledge in history has ever been assembled in this fashion (just as no child has ever learned to speak by first learning phonemes or to write by learning syllables).<sup>17</sup> For the qualitative researcher, knowledge exists only within the framework of some discourse that names the situation in which such knowledge works. Research hypotheses cannot capture the meaning of the evidence, any more than a prose paraphrase can capture the meaning of a poem.

Qualitative researchers cannot feign certainty nor should they claim communion with their subjects. Their goal is simply to render plausible the terms by which groups explain themselves to the world and to clarify the role that mass communication plays in such explanations. The "something" that qualitative research understands is not some set of truisms about communication but the awful difficulties groups face in mapping reality. The qualitative researcher is an explorer, not a tourist. Rather than speeding down the interstate, the qualitative researcher ambles along the circuitous back roads of public discourse and social practice. In reporting on that journey the researcher may conclude that some of those paths were, in fact, wider and more foot-worn than others, that some branched off in myriad directions, some narrowed along the way, some rambled endlessly while others ran straight and long, and some ended at the precipice, in the brambles, or back at their origin.

If in their work qualitative researchers do not specify variables, operationalize terms, or frame hypotheses, just how do they figure out what they are studying or what types of evidence they need to gather? They search the work of others for useful ways of talking about the phenomenon they wish to study. Quantitative researchers engage in much the same venture when they conduct literature reviews. For both quantitative and qualitative researchers, a literature review maps the discourse of the field. It tells the readers what existing work the new study resembles, and creates a motive that explains the subsequent account of the researcher's behavior. To construct a literature review is to legitimize the researcher's work for a community of readers.

Yet in their purpose and style, qualitative and quantitative literature reviews significantly differ. Quantitative research treats the litera-



***Qualitative research treats others' work as performances, vocabularies of experience, principles in whose name different researchers have examined the world.***

ture review as an epistemological jigsaw puzzle, an attempt to piece together "what we know" about some phenomenon. Qualitative researchers, wondering who the "we" is that hopes to do such knowing, simply use the review to identify an ongoing conversation that the researcher now proposes to join. The literature review acts as a *dramatis personae*, announcing the characters who are to be brought into the play and insinuating the setting and plot.

Quantitative and qualitative researchers likewise differ in their styles of reading their respective literatures. Quantitative researchers scour the work of others to lay bare its basic findings. Qualitative research treats others' work as performances, vocabularies of experience, principles in whose name different researchers have examined the world.<sup>11</sup> In the end quantitative research hopes to rewrite others' results into a single theoretical tale. Qualitative research hopes only to arrange a forum in which different styles of imagination can meet and debate.

Let us consider an example. Say that a researcher decides to study television, and more specifically to study parents' concerns about television's ability to inspire violent behavior in their children. This general interest might have arisen from any number of sources — from dissatisfaction with the way television violence has been conceptualized in the existing scholarly literature, from the attention recently paid to such issues by the popular press, from personal experience with activists in such debates, or from a suggestion (or directive) by one's academic advisor. The qualitative researcher must now translate this general concern into a blueprint for action, setting up rough boundaries within which to accomplish the research.

Let us suppose, in our example, that the researcher chooses to study the issue of children and television violence through cartoons. The justification for such a decision is not any prior knowledge that cartoons influence behavior more than other types of programs, but simply that broadcasters promote cartoons as children's programming and that such cartoons have aroused great controversy among parents and critics. Like a quantitative researcher, the qualitative researcher needs to define what counts for a cartoon. But that definition will not identify the essence of a cartoon so much as summarize what various groups — children, parents, federal regulators, broadcasters — mean by "cartoons." Similarly the qualitative researcher will not feel compelled to offer a standard definition of violence, for presumably the study intends in part to explain just what counts for violence in the eyes of different

groups, and how those groups know cartoon violence when they see it. For example, it would seem unprofitable to most qualitative researchers to employ an army of graduate students to sit around and count violent "acts," then construct indexes ranking the relative violence in various cartoons according to the number of acts per hour. The qualitative researcher would argue that such research really studies motions, physical movements largely abstracted from the cultural worlds in which actions mean. Counting, in this case, does not so much describe reality as produce a new, second-level narrative about the original cartoon that itself requires careful explanation — that is, who conducts such counting rituals, and for what purpose?

At this point the qualitative researcher can consider questions of product, practice, or commentary without worrying too much about which one best explains the controversy. Thus the researcher could address television cartoons as a *product*, asking the following types of questions: What models of reality do different cartoons offer? Where do the styles and story lines of cartoons come from (e.g., feature films, television shows, fairy tales, news stories, vaudeville)? How do cartoons' ways of imagining reality connect to those offered by other media that children use (or that parents praise or condemn)? What forms does violence take? Between what types of characters? In what situations? On what occasions? With what consequences?

The qualitative researcher could also question the *practices* of producing and consuming the cartoons, asking the following types of questions: What groups produce such shows? By what careers do they come to such work? How do professional values, organizational bureaucracies, economic imperatives, and technological possibilities collaborate to create distinctive styles of cartoon reality? In what terms do the cartoons' creators imagine their work and its appeal to children? What do children, in turn, make of the cartoon realities presented to them? How do they accept, reject, amend, deploy, or celebrate the content and form of cartoons? Beyond the content of particular cartoons, what does the act of cartoon watching signify for children, parents, teachers, and social critics?

The qualitative researcher could also address the whole debate over cartoons as a *commentary*, asking the following types of questions: How do different groups explain to themselves the origins, nature, and significance of "violent" cartoons? Have those groups told similar stories about other cultural artifacts or practices? Why do concerns about children play so large a role in those stories? What is the politics of research on television violence? Who sponsors it? For what ends? With what consequences?

Out of all these questions about product, practice, and commentary, it would be fruitless to single out only one or two as "hypotheses," since the researcher cannot yet demonstrate the links between narrative style, production practice, and public controversy. Any choice to begin the

study with either product, practice, or commentary will probably push the researcher through the other two forms of analysis as well. In our hypothetical study of television cartoons and children, a decision to compare the models of reality offered by different cartoons will likely lead the researcher to the processes through which cartoons are manufactured as well as to the political strategies producers use to forestall public criticism of cartoons.

Like quantitative researchers, qualitative researchers must attend to some matters of definition — which cartoons are being discussed, which children investigated, what sort of watching under what conditions, with what forms of parental scrutiny, for how long, at what times of day, in place of or in addition to what other types of activities. But such isolated details do not constitute the object of research. They are just facts that the researcher must learn along the way in order to decipher television cartoons as a symbolic product, practice, or commentary. Where the quantitative researcher hopes to isolate one or another main factor, the qualitative researcher hopes to reconstitute a sense of the whole.<sup>19</sup>

### *Step Three: Gathering the Evidence*

Qualitative researchers never lack for evidence, if only because humans never stop communicating. Their biggest problem is not gathering evidence but sorting it all out, and reconciling complementary but somewhat independent forms of evidence. The next section discusses in more depth the process of interpretation. In this section I will discuss the types of materials qualitative researchers gather for their interpretations.

Which types of communication behavior are most amenable to qualitative research methods? Those that leave “texts,” or inscriptions of human action. The notion that qualitative researchers “read” reality is metaphorical, of course — behavior as a text, understanding as an act of reading — but that metaphor can usefully describe what qualitative researchers do.<sup>20</sup> Even researchers who use numbers must symbolically transform the world in order to study it. The chemist turns a physical reaction into an equation; the social scientist employs an operational definition to align a sample group’s attitudes, behaviors, or opinions along a mathematically readable scale. All researchers translate the opaque chaos of the world into a system of signs, available for interpretation. The quantitative researcher maps the hubbub of everyday life as a set of mathematical regularities; the qualitative researcher maps that hubbub as a web of endlessly intersecting discourses.<sup>21</sup>

Qualitative researchers work with an extraordinary range of possible texts. There are the products themselves (newspaper and magazine stories, films, television programs, books, recorded songs), the materials created to promote those products (advertisements, press releases, talk-

*The topic of all qualitative research is the making of meaning.*

show appearances, premieres, signing parties); groups’ evaluations of those products (in magazine and news stories, reviews, academic and trade journals, corporate annual reports, and government committee investigations); stories about those products or the promotional campaigns mounted on their behalf (stars’ autobiographies, *Entertainment Tonight*, films on “The Making of . . .”); and spin-offs of the original product (sequels, “pre-quels,” fan clubs, toys and paraphernalia, popular expressions). And these are simply the materials appropriate to studying mass communication as a product. An analysis of mass communication as a practice or commentary would produce a list every bit as long (and including many of those same materials).

Qualitative researchers insist that talk in, for, and about the media is itself behavior, not merely a disguise draped over more real actions. Though they note inconsistencies in human behavior, qualitative researchers do not distinguish too relentlessly between “real” motives and rationalizations. They treat motives not as private reasons that cause behavior, but as public explanations, often constructed after the fact, that humans address to themselves and others.<sup>22</sup> To ascribe a motive to an actor is to define the nature of that individual’s act and the situation in which it occurred. Qualitative researchers do not accept every motive at face value as a cause of behavior; they only insist that no final, pre-symbolic explanation of human action exists, and that motives are best treated as interpretations of an action’s meaning.<sup>23</sup>

In choosing texts to interpret, qualitative researchers face three major problems. Their first task is to recoup texts rather than just paraphrases, propositions, or themes. In other words the researcher must resurrect a whole discourse in order to avoid reading too much into too little. Sometimes researchers choose materials that are already bounded by some existing public discourse — newspaper coverage of a controversial issue, public debates over a media product, the practices of a successful television producer, the moral reputation of a prominent media figure. The quantitative researcher might be tempted to dismiss such topics as case studies that offer no hope of generalization. But qualitative researchers do not offer their studies as illustrations of larger, supposedly more substantial theories. The topic of all qualitative research is the making of meaning. Each individual study displays that symbolic process at a different site, with a new script, cast of characters, set, props, and audience. But the process remains much the same.

Qualitative research is also generalizable to the extent that some community of readers considers a particular study representative of a wider set of concerns. In general, qualitative researchers handle the entire issue of “representativeness” quite differently than quantitative



researchers do. Quantitative research guarantees the probable validity of its results by choosing a sample that adequately stands for some larger population. For the qualitative researcher, "representativeness" is itself a discourse. The mass media are filled with assertions that a particular person, place, or event — MTV, "Doonesbury," Ted Turner, *USA Today* — is a "sign of the times." Rather than defining the typical in statistical terms, the qualitative researcher studies the typologies that groups invent as discourses in their own right.

Because qualitative researchers work with a social rather than a mathematical conception of types, they handle the problems of sampling differently, too. If possible the qualitative researcher avoids rigorously arbitrary systems such as content analysis, for such systems falsely assume that discourse is randomly scattered. With great effort qualitative researchers try to read *all* the relevant texts whenever possible, constructing a sample only when the sheer volume of work becomes unmanageable (for example, deciding whom to interview in a study of a large media organization). Even when they must sample, qualitative researchers may let their general sense of the discourse, rather than statistics, guide their choices. In examining newspaper coverage of a controversial issue, for instance, the researcher might first skim the coverage to discern the moments of most intense debate, then go back and read in depth the coverage at those key moments.<sup>24</sup> In effect, qualitative researchers treat sampling as a narrative dilemma. Focusing on a symbolically significant person, place, or event clears a space in which the researcher can tell his or her story.

Qualitative researchers justify this procedure by noting that humans' workaday sense of "the typical" is literary rather than mathematical. Types are narrative devices that groups use to condense and communicate their sense of the world.<sup>25</sup> Quantitative researchers sometimes try to match the audience's stereotypes to statistical "reality" — for example, by showing the disparity between heavy television viewers' perception of risk to crime statistics, or by comparing the distribution of social roles on television programs to the distribution in the work place. But such studies only belabor the obvious — the audience does not read the media or the world in statistical terms.<sup>26</sup> Media narratives remain symbolically significant regardless of their statistical accuracy.<sup>27</sup>

The second task for the qualitative researcher is to match the evidence gathered to the questions being asked. Questions about media stories as narrative products require literary or rhetorical techniques of textual interpretation; questions about media stories as commodities

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lemma.*

might require financial data; questions about media practices often require fieldwork. Choosing inappropriate forms of evidence can lead to egregious errors of interpretation. A few years ago, for example, I heard a film theorist describe, in elaborate detail, the power relationships created in television newscasts by camera angles and reporters' lines of sight. By allowing only the anchor and the reporters to address the camera directly, the theorist argued, television news directs the gaze of its interviewees away from the camera and thereby defends the news anchor's position of authority.

Afterwards I suggested a much simpler explanation of the same phenomenon: subjects do not face the camera because reporters *tell* them not to. The immediate impulse of almost anyone being interviewed on camera for the first time is to look straight at the camera. In this instance any explanation of how television directs the gaze needs to consider the practices by which reporters create television news. Isolating the immediate cause of the gazing behavior — the reporter's injunction to the interviewee — does not explain away that behavior, but it does help the researcher formulate better questions about such practices. Did early television film editors talk about the gaze problem? Did they consciously or unconsciously draw on other art forms, such as painting, photography, newsreels, or feature films for that style? Did today's style emerge out of a contest between competing styles of visual organization? What aesthetic problems of editing does the etiquette of gazing resolve? Do different societies employ different techniques of television narration? If they use the same style, are those standard techniques attributable to the technology itself, its social and political organization, or the conscious emulation of American styles of narrative? In this case an explanation that considered the historical evolution of television film styles seems more substantial than one built on an intense reading of camera movements that the audience itself may not attend to or understand.

This modest example points to a third perplexing task that the qualitative researcher faces in gathering evidence. Even when qualitative researchers immerse themselves in another's culture, they understand that culture in terms different from those that the natives use. In mass communication research, for instance, researchers read media artifacts with a different eye than consumers do. In general researchers read a limited number of media texts over and over, deeply, with a heightened sensitivity to theoretical issues and literary form. But many consumers (including the researcher, in civilian garb) read many texts once, quickly and haphazardly. Some consumers read a few key texts avidly and deeply, but their deep readings may not at all resemble those of the researcher.<sup>28</sup> The researcher's account must somehow mediate between these diverse styles of reading and interpretive vocabularies, not by pledging allegiance to either the insider or the outsider's lan-

guage, nor by averaging out the difference, but by inventing literary devices that force researcher's and subjects' readings to confront one another in the researcher's narrative.

Thus in gathering evidence, the qualitative researcher is likely to rely on some combination of literary analysis and fieldwork, with occasional economic or arithmetic analysis thrown in for good measure. Within mass communication there have been a few outstanding examples combining textual analysis and fieldwork. But on the whole textual analysis probably remains much more common today in qualitative studies, though not always for the best of reasons. Fieldwork is slow and difficult and depends on others' willingness to grant the researcher access, often only after a long rite of passage. Fieldwork also promises a great deal more psychic pain and intellectual discomfort than textual analysis. In an encounter with actual subjects, the researcher's theoretical armament may buy no special privilege. It may even be treated as a badge of the researcher's ignorance.

#### *Step Four: Interpreting the Evidence*

I have already suggested a metaphor — reading a text — by which much qualitative research today understands itself. Qualitative researchers, predictably enough, disagree about just how that metaphor ought to be applied. Some have insisted that the term *text* ought to refer to the flowing stream of language, as opposed to individual *works* such as books, articles, movies, or television programs.<sup>29</sup> I use the term *text* to refer to any inscription that fixes human action for contemplation and interpretation.<sup>30</sup> Mass communication artifacts, of course, fit that description quite well. Media products are texts in the narrow sense of works — commodities produced and consumed as units of experience. But such products are also texts in the broader sense — they inscribe human behavior in a way that makes it available to others. Like any cultural artifact, a media product fixes moments in a continuing flow of language, so that its discourse can always be read in situations unanticipated by its creator, and the meanings the audience imputes to it may not match those intended by the creator.<sup>31</sup> Thus a single television episode, considered as a text, implicitly references situations in which similar texts have been produced and consumed — that program's place in an ongoing series, the series' place in a genre, the genre's place in a medium, the medium's role in a communication system. And that single program's narrative style references a host of other cultural practices — news stories, fairy tales, work routines, political debates, family squabbles, and so forth.

Quantitative researchers cannot escape interpretation by using statistics. They merely resolve their interpretive disagreements by calling upon standard procedures. The method of operational definition, for instance, regulates the meaning of words with a brutal simplicity

***A minimum requirement for qualitative research might be that subjects be able to recognize themselves and their pleasures in the researcher's interpretation.***

impossible in everyday life. Research protocols, in effect, often forbid subjects from disputing the terms of analysis that the researchers set. The final narrative, such as a scholarly article, disguises many of these interpretive acts with varying degrees of disingenuousness. Although quantitative research engages in an endless series of interpretations, it tends to omit many such acts from the final account of its own performance.

What follows is an example of my own way of interpreting media products, practices, and commentaries. My approach has been heavily influenced by American sociological and anthropological traditions, particularly symbolic interactionism, and by a variety of idiosyncratic individual interpreters, such as Kenneth Burke. I learned my style of interpretation by emulating the work of others. Interpretation is a skill best learned in an oral culture, in the give and take of debate.<sup>32</sup> Sometimes the interpreter's critics will be a community of readers with shared theoretical interests, or an immediate community of colleagues or students. But for research that interprets the lives of others, it also ought to include the community of subjects who have been written about. A minimum requirement for qualitative research might be that subjects be able to recognize themselves and their pleasures in the researcher's interpretation.<sup>33</sup>

Novice researchers can develop interpretive skills by studying cultural worlds about which they already know something. Quantitative researchers generally fear the personal bias that such a procedure threatens to introduce. Yet the fact remains that many classics of qualitative research have employed precisely this strategy. In the 1950s and 1960s, the cultural studies movement in British communication research deliberately drew on the experience of the increasing numbers of working-class university students who entered adult education classes after World War II. Such students often felt the pull of two cultures with a special poignancy that sharpened their observational powers.<sup>34</sup> Robert Park, the influential University of Chicago sociologist, encountered a similar situation with his American students in the 1920s and 1930s. Park, who himself had entered sociology only after a career as a journalist, encouraged his immigrant and working-class students to see with new eyes the social worlds that they had inhabited. An impressive and influential body of ethnographic studies resulted from that advice.

This same method works quite well for qualitative studies of mass communication, too. While people participate in forms of mass-audience



popular culture, such as network television or country music, they also participate in an astonishing variety of smaller, more specialized popular culture worlds, each with its own sensibility. Novices might profitably learn the methods of qualitative research by studying the smaller, more manageable worlds that they know as either a fan or a participant. A few years ago, for instance, as part of a lecture on special-interest media, I read to my students the titles of about one hundred horse magazines published in the United States (a much-abbreviated list, I must add).

Afterwards a student came up to confess her enthusiasm for horses. Later that student wrote a master's project in which she analyzed newsletters written for model horse collectors — short, photocopied periodicals produced mostly by and for teenage girls. By posing our discussions in the mass communication and society course against her own experience as a model horse collector and reader of those newsletters, the student wrote a remarkably thoughtful account of the symbolic dramas sustained by those newsletters. In her case, as in the case of English working-class students or American immigrant students, the personal experience of traversing two cultural worlds heightened the researcher's sensitivity to the problems of interpreting one culture to another.

I now wish to interpret a brief text in not-quite-plain view. The reader should realize that my account of my interpretation is itself a text, an ordered inscription of actions that were, in their actual performance, more halting and haphazard. Finally, I make no claim of finality or certainty for my interpretation, though I feel confident of my ability to defend it. Others might choose to interpret this text differently, in the name of other principles that I disagree with or have not considered. Mostly I hope to illustrate how a qualitative researcher puzzles out the significance of a text.

My example comes from some research I conducted several years ago on how different groups interpreted the Great Chicago Fire of 1871.<sup>35</sup> This project began as part of a larger study of the "booster literature" of nineteenth-century Chicago: the hundreds of promotional brochures, guidebooks, city histories, and biographical dictionaries created to advertise the city to investors, settlers, traveling salesmen, and posterity. I was particularly interested in the extent to which businessmen set the terms by which the city publicly understood itself through that booster literature. In reading the booster tracts, I learned that Chicagoans repeatedly spoke of the fire as a landmark in their city's history. When I looked at stories of the fire published outside of Chicago, I found a similar interest (though one inflected with a quite different meaning,

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as I will soon explain). Americans in 1871 considered the Chicago Fire an important *national* event, in ways that seem incomprehensible today.

Therefore, I set out to recoup the significance that the fire once held for Chicagoans and others. My argument did not at first impute any historical significance to the fire beyond the testimony offered by Americans themselves. In hundreds of articles and books, they insisted, over and over, that the fire was significant; my task was simply to understand that talk. Besides investigating the fire per se, however, I also had in mind two larger theoretical issues. First, I hoped to juxtapose different texts — news stories, newspaper and magazine editorials, trade journal accounts, relief committee reports, personal letters, and city histories — in order to map cultural distinctions that were common in the post-Civil War United States. The fire discourse staked out the contested borders of urban, regional, and national identity.<sup>36</sup> My analysis of the fire discourse, in turn, highlighted the rhetorical strategies groups used to mark themselves off from one another. Second, I hoped to demonstrate that, in its reports of the fire, the emerging system of news mediated that discussion of cultural difference and simulated national unity and brotherhood. The Chicago Fire, for many Americans, affirmed the meanings attributed not only to Chicago but also to communication systems such as telegraphic news, which had made the fire available as a national event.

Because this project investigated a historical event, I needed to rely on written and printed texts rather than on interviews, observation, or participation. One of the texts that I examined, and will now interpret, was an editorial from the *Cleveland Weekly Herald* entitled "Our Wooden Cities," printed two weeks after the fire:

The fate of Chicago is a fearful lesson, but one that should teach Americans wisdom. It bears its fiery testimony against the recklessness with which we "throw up" cities. Chicago was a wooden city; but lately all of wood; houses, stores, and sidewalks. The street show was a goodly one, but a step to the rear of those grand buildings and the illusion vanished . . . Chicago was the most showily flimsy city, in its buildings, on the continent, and the wonder should be not that it has gone to ashes, but that it has stood so long. There never was such an exhibition in flimsiness in building as this fire has brought to light in Chicago . . . The lesson is dreadful, but similar lessons are yet to be taught the West, where expediency of the moment and outside show control.<sup>37</sup>

The editorialist predicted that, in the rush to rebuild, expediency would again "entirely override all prudence, and all deliberation," so that while "Chicago shall rise like a Phoenix from her ashes, she cannot, in the very nature of the case, rise to the beauty or even to the substantiality of the burned Chicago."<sup>38</sup>

How would a qualitative researcher interpret this editorial as a text? To begin with, the researcher would have to know something of the historical landscape that the editorial takes for granted in directing

*The text, in establishing the flimsiness of Chicago's buildings, demonstrates by implication the flimsiness of Chicago's claims of greatness.*

readers' attention to the fire. All discussions of Chicago in the nineteenth century implied something different than they do today. For many Americans Chicago was *the* representative city of its age. A trading settlement of only a few hundred in 1830, Chicago had grown to a city of over 300,000 in 1871, and many observers thought that it might eventually supersede New York in population and power. Those observers attributed Chicago's success, in varying degrees, to its fortunate geographic placement, its central position in an emerging network of canals, railroads, and telegraph lines, and the Yankee enterprise of its founders.<sup>39</sup> Chicago was "representative" because it was the most aggressively successful of all the western cities that were seeking to control the trade routes to the interior. By 1871 Chicago had largely overcome all its western rivals, such as Cincinnati, Milwaukee, St. Louis, Toledo, and Cleveland.<sup>40</sup> The long history of Chicago's extraordinary development and of this interurban rivalry help explain why a fire in *Chicago* could become a topic of such intense debate.

A closer knowledge of western development also helps explain the editorial's references to building style. Newer cities like Chicago were settled so quickly that they often relied on rapid, cheap construction methods, such as balloon-frame wooden buildings.<sup>41</sup> In 1871 even the more elegant Chicago buildings often featured large, wood-frame mansard roofs, which advertised a building's sophistication and elegance. During the Great Fire, those mansard roofs caught sparks carried by the high winds, and caused the "fireproof" stone buildings underneath to melt. The editorialist's claim that the buildings were showy and pretentious was a widely held moral judgment attached to an architectural style that was quite popular in Chicago.<sup>42</sup> The text, in establishing the flimsiness of Chicago's buildings, demonstrates by implication the flimsiness of Chicago's claims of greatness.

Chicago became a target for such editorial chiding because of its unrestrained boasting about itself. All Western cities, in trying to woo settlers from the East, bragged about their advantages and denigrated their rivals. They boasted about the richness of their agricultural hinterland, the availability of water transportation and roads, and the prospects of real estate investment. But Chicago was widely considered to have the loudest and most aggressive boosters. Indeed a popular adage about the city insisted that "The chief products of Chicago are corner lots, statistics, and wind" — that is, boasting. Set against forty years of extravagant claims, the destruction of Chicago's central busi-

ness district appeared to many commentators as an unfortunate but all too appropriate humiliation.

Finally, the editorial discovers in the Chicago Fire, a larger lesson for the entire country. In that fire, considered as a moral tale, Chicago exemplifies the careless expansionism and empty pride of the West. The editorial draws upon a cultural map of the United States used by many Americans, in which "East" and "West" convey a wide range of opposed meanings.<sup>43</sup> For easterners the East signified a place of stable, serious wealth and sophistication that had earned its forms of leisure and culture; the West signified a primitive world of blowhards, speculators, fast-buck artists, and buckskin aristocrats. For westerners the East was the fiefdom of rich, smug, sissified, idle urbanites who had lost touch with Americans' agricultural origins; the West was home to industrious, practical, plain-speaking common people. The Cleveland editorialist, in this case, enlists his own city on the side of the East (though in a different context he might have allied Cleveland with the West). Chicagoans in 1871 generally considered theirs a western city. The Cleveland editorialist, in this case, portrays his own city to Chicago's disadvantage by arguing that Cleveland, which Chicago had beaten in the battle for trade, morally surpassed its rival by living within its means.

Noting the shortness of the editorial and the length of my explanation, a novice might well ask where all that interpretation came from. There is no easy answer, except perhaps to say "from immersion in the materials." After reading hundreds of articles and books about the fire and the history of Chicago, I began to recognize recurring patterns of discourse. My claims that "many" Americans thought this or that about Chicago rest on my reading of those materials. I verify those claims, in my article, by showing the persistence of certain themes, phrases, rhetorical tropes, and plots across a variety of texts. Thus the mythic opposition of East and West appears not only in newspaper editorials but also in popular fiction, businessmen's autobiographies, personal letters, political speeches, magazine iconography, and habits of dress. Readers' acceptance of my claims depends upon their judgment of 1) whether I had read enough of the right kinds of materials, and 2) whether I had interpreted those materials in a reasonable, useful, thoughtful, and imaginative way. Readers will judge my conclusions based upon their own knowledge of those same materials, their prior understanding of other materials that they claim resemble my materials, and their simultaneous reading of passages that I quote in my interpretation.

In my reading of the editorial, I tried to recount how it works to condemn Chicago, praise Cleveland, comment on westerners' boastfulness, and enlist readers' loyalties in an ongoing debate about American character. In this case, as in all qualitative research, I am not explaining the evidence by analyzing its "real" causes (for example, by showing that the writer was an obsessive Chicago-hater), but by translating the explanations Americans in 1871 offered for their own behavior, atti-



tudes, and opinions. My interpretation starts by reading the signposts that the editorialist assumed readers would notice, such as references to the Cleveland-Chicago rivalry and to modern architectural styles. My interpretation further attempts to capture the moral tone that the editorial's rhetoric creates. What I have described here is my reading of a single text. My final article drew on dozens of such texts, and attempted to read the Cleveland paper's editorial within still other contexts — compared to editorials from other cities such as Detroit, Cincinnati, and New Orleans; compared to editorials about a similar large fire in Boston one year later; compared to unpublished accounts of the fire such as personal letters. My argument ultimately went far beyond the minutiae of the Chicago Fire — to a discussion of how Americans attribute "character" to their cities, as a public ritual by which to understand themselves as a nation.<sup>44</sup>

How did I know when I had gathered enough material? Qualitative researchers never know for sure. I stopped when I thought I had exhausted the range of rhetorical variations, and the marginal value of collecting one more editorial on the fire from one more small-town paper just seemed too small. In practice, however, my interpretation also anticipated my need to tell the story of my research to others. I assembled enough materials to tell a certain type of story in a credible way. I read till I felt able to justify my interpretations to a reader. Quantitative researchers, though they might wince at that description, actually make the very same choices. The credibility of a quantitative analysis depends as much upon the match between authorial performance and readers' expectations as upon any presumed correspondence between evidence and reality. The decision to use statistics, for example, is not natural. Researchers confirm the authority of their texts by choosing to honor the social conventions governing "scientific" displays of reality. Quantitative researchers decide how much is enough whenever they choose a level of inter-judge reliability or significance that they will accept. If the community of readers decides that the researcher did enough well enough, they accept the article as credible or, best of all, scientific.

My interpretation of the Chicago Fire is hardly irrevocable or final. Someone else might find a hitherto undiscovered document that compels me to reassess my interpretation. Or, as circumstances change, others might choose to interpret all the texts I used from a perspective that I had not anticipated, in the light of new interests or of new work done on related topics. Any refutation of my interpretation, it should be noted, necessarily requires my reader to construct an alternative interpretation. The notion, commonly heralded in the philosophy of science, that an argument should be susceptible of falsification, does not fit qualitative research very well. There is no non-symbolic "data" that can be marshaled against my interpretation to disprove and dismiss it, once and for all. The critic constructs an alternative account of the evidence, in the process often redefining what should count as evidence or even who

should count as the relevant community of readers. We both submit our interpretations to those readers, who decide which interpretation will, for a time, govern our common sense about the Chicago Fire. The publishing of an article marks a pause in the interpretive process, a measure in which writer, critics, and readers can catch their breath before moving on. That conversation never ends, though at times it might lapse into silence.

### *Step Five: Telling the Researcher's Story*

Quantitative research tends to standardize researchers' narratives, just as it tends to standardize concepts, codings, questions, responses, and subjects. The aesthetic ideal, for many quantitative researchers, seems to be transparency. Narrative wraps the evidence in a clear protective film that preserves the purity of the research. A style of stark, denotative simplicity simulates disinterest and impartiality, and affirms the authority of the researcher's analysis. This style typically observes a strict ceremonial silence on key issues of its own social practice. Borrowing some phrasing from Erving Goffman, we might consider scholarly articles as front-stage behaviors, governed by the proprieties of public performance. Barroom discussions at conventions, in contrast, are back-stage behaviors, in which researchers need not maintain the public persona of scientist.<sup>45</sup>

Unfortunately for the qualitative researcher, writing up the research results is never so simple. Because the qualitative researcher argues that reality is symbolically constituted rather than pre-existent, the act of writing confronts the researcher with yet another interpretive dilemma. The qualitative researcher cannot easily segregate the processes of data-gathering, discussion, and publication. The construction of concepts, the standardization of data-gathering procedures, the definition of research hypotheses — all are symbolic acts requiring the researcher to begin the interpretive process before reading a single text or writing a single word. For this reason recent discussions of ethnography stress that writing is no mere ornament appended afterwards to the research, but is the interpreter's very mode of understanding.<sup>46</sup> Thus, having traveled with me to this last step, the reader may realize that every other step thus far has treated research as a form of writing as well as of reading culture.

***No one  
narrative style  
works for all  
researchers or  
all topics.***

Qualitative researchers self-consciously employ literary style to travel between the texts they read and the texts they write. Powerful forces may nudge the style of a research report in a specific direction. The pull of social conventions, such as genres, or the push of powerful censors, such as doctoral committees, journal editors, or the

marketplace can limit the researcher's options. But the evidence itself always remains amenable to different literary treatments. At one extreme the narrator can hide behind the narrative, as in much traditional social science writing. At the other extreme, the narrator can appear everywhere, suffusing the narrative with personal presence. The first strategy too naively denies the researcher's role; the second too thoroughly disguises the subjects.

No one narrative style works for all researchers or all topics. Each choice of narrative stance carries its own price. John Van Maanen has noted that the history of ethnographic writing suggests three common authorial stances — the realist tale, the confessional tale, and the impressionist tale.<sup>47</sup> In the realist tale, the researcher enacts a style of scientific objectivity, remaining invisible to the reader (however obvious he may have been to the subjects) in order to convey a sense of detachment and impartiality. In the confessional tale, the researcher reveals his presence by casting the story as a personal journey into and out of some cultural world. In the impressionist tale, the researcher eschews both these literary genres, moving somewhat unpredictably between topics, taking pleasure, at times, in disrupting the reader's narrative expectations, and calling attention to his text's own performance.

The trick for a novice researcher is to choose a literary persona that feels comfortable but that does not acquiesce too readily to the conventions of common-sense realism. That persona should not destroy the integrity of the subjects' cultural worlds in the very process of writing about them. The researcher should neither reduce those worlds to dessicated propositions, nor drown them in an excess of personal reverie. Writing is a social act, and the researcher-as-writer must somehow keep faith with both subjects and readers. Sometimes the most interesting story may be the transformation of a researcher by an encounter with an alien culture (some would say, in fact, that that is the only story the researcher ever tells). But the researcher ought not be surprised if subjects and readers, at some point, refuse to be reduced to narrative props in someone else's one-man show.

Qualitative researchers can honor their commitments by maintaining a sense of methodological modesty. Where appropriate, a research account should admit its own limitations and inconsistencies in a forthright, fair-minded way. While it can never reach the artificially high standard of falsification, qualitative narratives should invite the collaboration and criticism of others. Most importantly, qualitative researchers should practice their own form of what quantitative researchers call

***Qualitative researchers typically justify their performances by appeals to social and political principles . . .***

“reality-testing.” Researchers should explain their work not just to academic colleagues (who, after all, share their theoretical enthusiasms and standards of professional judgment) but also to their subjects. In this respect, some recent feminist work has taken up where early cultural studies and urban ethnography left off. Perhaps because they sense more acutely than men the gap between university work and home work, perhaps because they more intensely dislike the predatory style of much academic performance, some feminist researchers have practiced just this sort of subject review.<sup>48</sup> The researcher may choose to resist or reject subjects' reactions, but those reactions should be heard, sometimes in the research narrative itself.

### *What Does the Qualitative Researcher Know?*

Qualitative researchers possess no handy statistical procedures for judging the adequacy of one another's work. They argue less about whether a study mirrors “reality” than about whose reality their narrative captures. Even after all the research, and the most skillful storytelling, reality remains obdurate. The best a qualitative researcher can do is to marshal a metaphor, to argue that reality has been managed, detained, coped with, slowed up, clarified, scaled down, illuminated, intensified, or resurrected. Qualitative researchers typically justify their performances by appeals to social and political principles other than “science.”

What is it, then, that qualitative research claims to know about mass communication? For me, at least, the purpose of qualitative research is not to control others' behavior with our bromides, nor to diffuse the news of our civilization's virtue, nor to link consumers everywhere in a global marketplace, nor to rev the engines of public opinion, but simply to know our cultural habitat. For better or worse, modern people dwell in symbolic worlds mediated by mass communication. Qualitative researchers reconstruct the meaning of modernity on the social site created by those mass media. In the tradition in which I work, qualitative researchers seek nothing more nor less than to become wise in the ways of others. Erving Goffman has offered a succinct definition of what it means to be wise in the sense that I mean. The wise, Goffman writes, are

persons who are normal but whose special situation has made them intimately privy to the secret life of the stigmatized individual and sympathetic with it, and who find themselves accorded a measure of acceptance, a measure of courtesy membership in the clan. Wise persons are the marginal men before whom the individual with a fault need feel no shame nor exert self-control, knowing that in spite of his failing he will be seen as an ordinary other.<sup>49</sup>

I can think of no better way to describe the moral impulse and intellectual purpose of qualitative research.



### Suggested Readings

One of the first tasks of anyone who wishes to do qualitative research is to learn the lingo. The single best introduction to qualitative research in mass communication is probably James W. Carey, *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989). The bibliography in Carey's book will lead the novice to many of the most relevant theoretical works in sociology, anthropology, history, and philosophy.

A number of works in related fields clearly explain the concept of symbolic action. Among the best are the following: in sociology, Anselm Strauss, *Mirrors and Masks* (Mill Valley, Calif.: Sociology Press, 1969); Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1959) and *Stigma* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1963); and Hugh D. Duncan, *Communication and Social Order* (New York: Bedminster Press, 1962) and *Symbols in Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968). In anthropology, Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973) and *Local Knowledge* (New York: Basic Books, 1983). In philosophy, Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982). In literary criticism, the work of Kenneth Burke, whose most relevant essays are now conveniently collected in *On Symbols and Society*, ed. Joseph R. Gusfield (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1989). Two very useful collections that include the work of a number of scholars not listed above are Paul Rabinow and William M. Sullivan, eds., *Interpretive Social Science: A Reader* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), and Rabinow and Sullivan, eds., *Interpretive Social Science: A Second Look* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

With all the recent interest in qualitative research, a few books on method have begun to appear. Many of them include much more detailed information about field-work techniques than I have been able to include. Among the most useful are Michael Agar, *Speaking of Ethnography* (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage, 1986); Bruce L. Berg, *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1989); Robert G. Burgess, ed., *Field Research: A Sourcebook and Field Manual* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1982); Norman Denzin, *Interpretive Interactionism* (Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage, 1989); Anselm L. Strauss, *Qualitative Analysis for Social Scientists* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1987); and Steven J. Taylor and Robert Bogdan, *Introduction to Qualitative Research Methods*, 2d ed. (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1984).

Some older methodological works in sociology continue to prove valuable. Among my favorites are Howard S. Becker, *Sociological Work* (Chicago: Aldine, 1970); the essay on "Do-It-Yourself Media Sociology" in Stanley Cohen and Jock Young, eds., *The Manufacture of News* (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage, 1973), pp. 371-83; Norman Denzin, *The Research Act*, 3d ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1988); John and Lyn H.

Lofland, *Analyzing Social Settings*, 2d ed. (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1984); and C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), especially his appendix "On Intellectual Craftsmanship," pp. 195-226. Howard Becker's *Writing for Social Scientists* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986) is a marvelous guide to the writing process, by a distinguished sociologist. Far better than anyone else has, Becker explores the practical problems of translating social research into narrative.

The book-length works listed below intelligently apply qualitative methods to the study of mass communication. These works exemplify the genre I have analyzed — reports on research — and do not represent the wide range of theoretical positions currently being debated in qualitative studies. Among the works that beginners might find instructive and enjoyable are the following: Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), especially the essays "Peasants Tell Tales: the Meaning of Mother Goose" and "Workers Revolt: the Great Cat Massacre"; Simon Frith, *Sound Effects* (New York: Pantheon, 1981); Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970); Herbert J. Gans, *Deciding What's News* (New York: Vintage, 1979); Todd Gitlin, *Inside Prime Time* (New York: Pantheon, 1983) and *The Whole World Is Watching* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980); Joseph R. Gusfield, *Symbolic Crusade* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1963); Stuart Hall and Paddy Whannel, *The Popular Arts* (New York: Pantheon, 1965); Dick Hebdige, *Subculture, the Meaning of Style* (London: Methuen, 1979); Orrin E. Klapp, *Symbolic Leaders* (Chicago: Aldine, 1964); David Morley, *The "Nationwide" Audience: Structure and Decoding* (London: British Film Institute, 1980); Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1983); Michael Schudson, *Advertising, the Uneasy Persuasion* (New York: Basic Books, 1984); Anselm Strauss, *Images of the American City* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction, 1976); and Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).

The following collections of essays include some fine examples of qualitative research: James W. Carey, ed., *Media, Myths, and Narratives* (Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage, 1988); Stanley Cohen and Jock Young, eds., *The Manufacture of News* (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage, 1973), as well as a revised edition in 1981; Richard Collins, et al., *Media Culture and Society, A Critical Reader* (Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage, 1986); Todd Gitlin, ed., *Watching Television* (New York: Pantheon, 1986); Michael Gurevitch, et al., *Culture, Society and the Media* (London: Methuen, 1982); and Robert Karl Manoff and Michael Schudson, eds., *Reading the News* (New York: Pantheon, 1986). Much of the best English-language qualitative research in mass communication now appears in the American journals *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* and *Communication*, and in the British journal *Media Culture and Society*.

## NOTES

1. Problems of structure and function, interestingly enough, continue to be claimed by both traditions. For each tradition, structural functionalism asserts a claim to systemic knowledge and announces the political or scientific seriousness of the researcher.

2. For a summary of the attack on qualitative research, as well as an able defense of it, see Kathryn M. Borman, Margaret D. LeCompte, and Judith Preissle Goetz, "Ethnographic and Qualitative Research Design and Why It Doesn't Work," *American Behavioral Scientist* 30 (October 1986): 42-57.

3. James W. Carey, "Mass Communication and Cultural Studies," in *Communication as Culture* (Boston: Unwin-Hyman, 1989), 37-68, discusses the intellectual origins of qualitative studies.

4. Lewis Mumford, *Technics and Human Development* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1967), 14-97, and Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 55-83, discuss the role of culture in human evolution.

5. Because scholars in communication, sociology, anthropology, literature, philosophy, and other fields have so thoroughly discussed these theoretical assumptions, I will not elaborate them further. Readers unfamiliar with or skeptical about these assumptions should read some of the theoretical discussions cited at the end of my essay before proceeding further.

6. Qualitative researchers disagree about just how the mass media organize the symbolic realm within which humans dwell. For discussions that suggest the range of disagreement, see Stuart Hall, "Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms," in *Media, Culture and Society: A Critical Reader*, ed. Richard Collins et al. (Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage, 1986), 33-48; and Lawrence Grossberg, "Strategies of Marxist Cultural Interpretation," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 1 (December 1984): 392-421.

7. Harold D. Lasswell, "The Structure and Function of Communication in Society," in *Mass Communications*, ed. Wilbur Schramm, 2d ed. (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1972), 117-30.

8. James W. Carey, "A Cultural Approach to Communication," in *Communication as Culture*, 13-36. Even to discuss Carey's terms *transmission* and *ritual* as competing theories of communication is to misstate Carey's intention. Carey did not argue that transmission and ritual were diametric opposites. Rather he saw them as two sides in a historical discourse, two competing (and somewhat overlapping) languages through which Americans have imagined the social and political significance of emerging mass communication media.

9. These terms are my way of describing what qualitative researchers do. I have applied these terms to qualitative historical research in John J. Pauly, "New Directions for Research in Journalism History," in *Guide to Sources in American Journalism*, ed. and comp. Lucy Shelton Caswell (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1989), 31-46.

10. Semioticians have devoted the most attention to deciphering the codes in media products. For representative examples of their method, read *On Signs*, ed. Marshall Blonsky (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985). For the application of semiotics to social research, see Peter K. Manning, *Semiotics and Fieldwork* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1987). The most thoroughgoing attempt to apply semiotic analysis to media studies has been the work of John Fiske. See, for example, *Television Culture* (London: Methuen, 1987), *Reading the Popular* (Boston: Unwin-Hyman, 1989), *Understanding Popular Culture* (Boston: Unwin-Hyman, 1989), and, with John Hartley, *Reading Television* (London: Methuen, 1978).

11. James W. Carey and Albert L. Kreiling, "Popular Culture and Uses and Gratifications: Notes Toward an Accommodation," in *The Uses of Mass Communications*, ed. Jay G. Blumler and Elihu Katz (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage, 1974), 225-48, suggest the ways in which such studies would need to go beyond questions of "uses and gratifications." Innumerable articles now confront the theoretical problems of studying "the audience." Studies of actual audiences remain rare. Some provocative examples of audience studies are Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983); David Morley, *The "Nationwide" Audience: Structure and Decoding* (London: British Film Institute, 1980); and Charles Frazier, "The Social Character of Children's Television Viewing," *Communication Research* 8 (1981): 307-22. For an apt warning against romanticizing the audience, see Michael Schudson, "The New Validation of Popular Culture: Sense and Sentimentality in Academia," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 4 (1987): 51-68.

12. I place the word *medium* in quotes because at the center of such controversies is not a technical, physical medium of communication, but the social forms that a technology enables, and the moral reputation of the people who use it.

13. Joli Jensen's *Redeeming Modernity: Contradictions in Media Criticism* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1990) shows how commentaries on the media can be interpreted as responses to the experience of modernity.

14. For instance, Willard D. Rowland, Jr., *The Politics of TV Violence* (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage, 1983) shows how arguments about television's effects might be more plausibly read as a political discourse rather than an argument over scientific truth.

15. I realize that the order in which I discuss these procedures does not necessarily correspond to the ideal stages described by philosophers of science. My order simply better serves my own narrative purposes. I would add that social scientists, unlike philosophers, move rather freely between these procedures when planning their actual work.

16. Clifford Geertz discusses "experience-near" and "experience-distant" concepts in his essay "From the Native's Point of View: On the Nature of Anthropological Understanding," in *Local Knowledge* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 55-70.

17. On this issue qualitative researchers generally follow the arguments of Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* 2d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

18. Kenneth Burke calls such vocabularies "terministic screens." See "Terministic Screens," in *Language as Symbolic Action* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963), 44-62.

19. I use the term *whole* cautiously. The researcher has no power to decide when a given experience or symbolic drama starts or stops. Beginnings and ends are narrative devices that the qualitative researcher uses to mark off a space for the evidence, as when Erving Goffmann decides to focus on situations or encounters. I define the term *whole* indirectly, by contrast with any interpretation that subjects would feel left out something crucial. Qualitative research aims, in part, to produce accounts that subjects will recognize as reasonably complete.

20. James Carey has considered the consequences of different metaphors for the interpretive process in "The Language of Technology: Talk, Text, and Template as Metaphors for Communication," in *Essays in Technology and Communication*, ed. Martin Medhurst (Pullman: Washington State University Press, 1990).

21. For a fuller discussion of the world-as-text metaphor, see Paul Ricoeur, "The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as a Text," in *Interpretive Social Science*, ed. Paul Rabino and William M. Sullivan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 73-101.

22. For an elegant discussion of motives and social identity, see Anselm Strauss, *Mirrors and Masks* (Mill Valley, Calif.: The Sociology Press, 1969), especially 44-88. Kenneth Burke, of course, has devoted much of his career to explaining the grammar and rhetoric of motives. For a simple introduction to his ideas about motives, see *Permanence and Change* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), 19-36.

23. A qualitative researcher would note that different cultures privilege different motives, as when relentlessly high-minded appeals to sincerity or religious inspiration today arouse less comment, scrutiny, or ridicule than they probably deserve.

24. This technique resembles what historians have called postholing—conducting in-depth studies at several key moments spread over some historical period.

25. In *Mirrors and Masks* (Mill Valley, Calif.: Sociology Press, 1969), 21, Anselm Strauss warns against the assumption that humans can know the world (or themselves) without the use of social types:

The propensity for certain categories invented by any group to be slanderous, to partake of epithet, derogation and innuendo, has been bemoaned by liberals, debunkers, teachers, and all others who have wished to set others' classifications straight. Since groups inevitably are in conflict over issues—otherwise they would not be different groups—and since events inevitably come to be viewed differently by those who are looking up or down opposite ends of the gun, it is useless to talk of trying to eradicate from the human mind the tendency to stereotype, to designate nastily, and to oversimplify.

26. That lack of statistical awareness is not a problem, save for those who wish to substitute professionally produced statistical assessments for political decisions about risk. Statistics are themselves narrative artifacts. Their main trait, as narratives, is their tendency to *hide* their own narrative qualities behind a veil of objectivity. "Uniform" crime



statistics, to pick a common example, claim to be an authoritative account of social deviance, but behind those statistics stand an infinite series of "ifs." Such statistics rely upon changing FBI categories for crime, the variable accuracy of local arrest records, differences in patrolmen's handling of incidents, and citizens' inconsistent habits of reporting crime. Statisticians always qualify their results in just this fashion. But social scientists sometimes disregard these interpretive acts in their effort to translate statistical significance into social or political significance.

27. Once gathered and publicized, statistics about television portrayals achieve a life of their own. Groups seize upon those findings to dramatize their causes, buttress their arguments, or repel attacks.

28. Such groups would include fans of the Old Testament, romance novels, and "Star Trek." For a discussion of how Trekkies appropriate that program for their own narratives, see Henry Jenkins III, "Star Trek Rerun, Reread, Rewritten: Fan Writing as Textual Poaching," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 5 (June 1988): 85-107.

29. Roland Barthes introduces this distinction in "From Work to Text," in *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism*, ed. Josue V. Harari (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1979), 73-81.

30. My usage follows that of Clifford Geertz in his essay "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 3-30.

31. Qualitative researchers disagree about how best to describe the multivocal qualities of a media text. Analysts influenced by literary theory argue that language itself always deconstructs intended meanings in ways that an author cannot control. E.g., Horace Newcomb, "On the Dialogic Aspects of Mass Communication," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 1 (March 1984): 34-50. Analysts influenced by speech-act theory argue that it is the social situations in which texts are read, not the literal language itself, that creates multiple readings. E.g., Stanley Fish, "Normal Circumstances, Literal Language, Direct Speech Acts, the Ordinary, the Everyday, the Obvious, What Goes Without Saying, and Other Special Cases," in *Interpretive Social Science*, 243-65. Analysts influenced by Marxism argue that audiences often resist or ignore official meanings and appropriate media texts for their own subversive readings and practices. E.g., Lawrence Grossberg, "Is There Rock after Punk?" *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 3 (March 1986): 50-74.

32. Paul Rock has argued that one of the main traditions of qualitative research — symbolic interactionism — has for some time passed down its methods, from professor to graduate student, by a kind of oral culture. As a result, symbolic interactionism has often been accused of lacking a systematic method that outsiders could replicate. See Rock, *The Making of Symbolic Interactionism* (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1979), 24-28.

33. The standards for judging an interpretation are a matter of social and political, not merely scientific, dispute. Such debates often consider the purposes of the research as well as its methods. An interesting example was the controversy that greeted publication of Laud Humphreys' *The Tearoom Trade* (Chicago: Aldine, 1970), a participant-observer study of anonymous homosexual encounters in public washrooms. For a summary of that debate, see Donald R. Warwick, "Tearoom Trade: Means and Ends in Social Research," *Hastings Center Studies* 1 (1975): 27-35.

34. The best example of that genre remains Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970).

35. John J. Pauly, "The Great Chicago Fire as a National Event," *American Quarterly* 36 (Winter 1984): 668-83. My discussion of the meaning of the Chicago Fire summarizes the documentary evidence cited in this article. For a further discussion of Chicago boosterism, see John J. Pauly, "The City Builders: Chicago Businessmen and Their Changing Ethos, 1871-1909" (Ph.D. diss., University of Illinois, 1979).

36. On matters of language and identity, see Strauss, *Mirrors and Masks*, 15-30.

37. "Our Wooden Cities," *Cleveland Weekly Herald*, 21 October 1871, 4.

38. "Our Wooden Cities," 4.

39. John S. Wright, *Chicago: Past, Present, Future* (Chicago, 1868) discusses all these themes, in a prophetic style commonly found in the early booster literature.

40. Wyatt Belcher, *The Economic Rivalry Between St. Louis and Chicago* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1947) remains one of the best descriptions of midwestern cities' battle for trade in the 19th century.

41. Daniel Boorstin, *The Americans — the National Experience* (New York: Random House, 1965), 148-52, discusses the importance of balloon-frame housing on the frontier.

42. For a typical example of this reaction, see Frederick Law Olmsted, "Chicago in Distress," *Nation* 3 (1871): 304. Carl W. Condit, *The Chicago School of Architecture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964) conveniently summarizes the changing styles of commercial building that emerged in the wake of the fire.

43. For a more general discussion of these country-city debates in American history, see Anselm Strauss, *Images of the American City* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction, 1976).

44. Clifford Geertz describes this strategy as "a continuous dialectical tacking between the most local of local detail and the most global of global structure in such a way as to bring them into simultaneous view." "From the Native's Point of View: On the Nature of Anthropological Understanding," in *Local Knowledge*, 69.

45. As a writing style, it must be added, transparency also encourages rapid production of publications, once the data has been processed, and disguises the disharmony of individual voices in a multiple-author article.

46. George E. Marcus and Dick Cushman, "Ethnographies as Texts," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 11 (1980): 25-69; James Clifford, "On Ethnographic Authority," in *The Predicament of Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988), 21-54; James Clifford and George E. Marcus, eds., *Writing Culture: the Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986); Clifford Geertz, *Works and Lives: the Anthropologist as Author* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1988).

47. *Tales of the Field* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

48. Janice Radway discusses her relationship to the various readers of her book, *Reading the Romance* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1984) in "Identifying Ideological Seams: Mass Culture, Analytical Method, and Political Practice," *Communication* 9 (1986): 93-123. Lana Rakow, having studied how the telephone transformed women's social relations in a small Midwestern town, organized a coffee klatch at which she presented her conclusions and invited responses. See "Gender, Communication, and Technology: A Case Study of Women and the Telephone" (Ph.D. diss., University of Illinois, 1987).

49. Erving Goffman, *Stigma* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1963), 28.

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