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The Affordances of Interview Research on Zoom: New Intimacies and Active Listening

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Abstract:

In this piece, I describe the advantages of carrying out interview research on Zoom. These include the new forms of intimacy afforded by the platform, and the potential for "active listening." At the same time, I suggest that the ability to carry out such research in peace and quiet is the product of privilege, which is unevenly distributed. The Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing inequalities, hitting women with young children particularly hard.

Keywords:

Coronavirus, Covid-19, Interview research, Journalism

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Ever since completing my PhD in 2000, based on ethnographic field work and interviews with journalists, I've always been passionate about doing research which illuminates the lived experience of the professionals who make journalism happen. For the past five years, I've turned my attention to the work of community journalists. Sometimes referred to as "hyperlocal" journalists, these practitioners have launched news outlets in local communities (Harte, Howell & Williams, 2018). They provide an invaluable service, particularly in the light of widespread closures of local newspapers. I had planned an ambitious project focused on travelling around the UK to interview community journalists about their work. My aim was to carry out at least 30 face-to-face interviews in the spring and summer of 2020.

But then COVID hit. When the lockdown started in the UK in March 2020, I thought I would have to abandon my research. However, I quickly realised that the lockdown and the new technologies that it necessitated represented an opportunity. I decided that instead of travelling around the UK, I would simply carry out the interviews online. I obtained ethics approval for the modified research project, applied for a small pot of funding from the British Academy's COVID-19 grant scheme.[i] While I have a long list of failed grant applications, this time I was successful. The funding enabled me to pay participants for their time, as well as to hire a researcher to carry out some of the interviews and help with the transcription.

With the help of my researcher, Julia Boelle, and my colleague, Inaki Garcia-Blanco, who joined the project, we completed a total of 59 interviews over the course of the summer of 2020 (I did 24). These interviews, aside from presenting an astounding wealth of data, also represented almost half of all the entire membership of the network of established community news organisations, the Independent Community News Network, from which we had recruited our interviewees.

Doing research interviews on Zoom in the middle of a global pandemic turned out to have distinctive advantages, along with particular challenges. While concerns about privacy violations and other security risks on Zoom are widely documented (e.g. Harwell, 2020), Zoom has also become a ubiquitous feature of pandemic life. This includes the conduct of academic research.

The implications of doing research under these circumstances are wide-reaching and go far beyond the transition to digital research methodologies. Deborah Lupton (2020) has pointed to the peculiar "affective atmospheres" of research in a pandemic. On the one hand, she suggests that research participants may be more accessible than usual – after all, they are bored, isolated and confined to their homes; and therefore welcome the distraction. In the case of our interviewees, they would ordinarily be extremely difficult to pin down: Under "normal" circumstances, they would be rushing around their local communities, doing interviews, attending meetings, and reporting stories. In the pandemic, they were stuck at home like the rest of us.

On the other hand, Lupton (2020) cautions that research participants suffer from the (often invisible) burdens of life in a pandemic, including anxiety, caring responsibilities and illness. In the case of my research project, community journalism is a precarious profession at the best of times (Wahl-Jorgensen,

2020). The lockdown hit many of the journalists and their outlets very hard. They lost the vast majority of their local advertising revenue, as events were cancelled, and many businesses forced to shut down. In some instances, the economic hit constituted an existential threat to their publications.

Issues of economic inequality and deprivation played into the experiences of the practitioners we interviewed, and also some of those that were unable to take part.

In one extreme case, an interviewee had deliberately opted to live in a homeless shelter, because it was the only way he could see himself being able to continue pursuing community journalism. He was the only interviewee who used a virtual Zoom background. He explained that the homeless shelter was very ugly and messy, and faced a grim and busy highway that it was therefore much nicer to have an anonymous background. Here, the affordances of Zoom allowed this interviewee agency and control over his self-presentation which would otherwise have been difficult to achieve. At the same time, it highlighted the fact that the carefully curated domestic spaces that so often frame Zoom appearances constitute both a burden and a privilege in an environment of heightened self-presentation concerns (Kirk & Rifkin, 2020).

In some cases, interviewees were simply unavailable because of their circumstances. Female interviewees were underrepresented in our sample because several pleaded unavailability due to caring responsibilities, and many never responded. For example, a result of lost income, one female editor had been forced to take on an additional job making products for delivery according to inflexible and rigid timetables, which meant that she was unable to fit an interview into her schedule. The structural inequalities exacerbated by the pandemic are profoundly gendered. They include the uneven distribution

of caring responsibilities, which have hit women with young children and elderly relatives particularly hard (Landivar et al., 2020). In the case of my research project, such inequalities had epistemological consequences, shaping who I was able to interview and, ultimately, the knowledge produced as a result.

Despite these challenging circumstances for research, Zoom offered several distinct advantages. First, it is relatively accessible, as participants only need to click through a web link, rather than to download and install software. Secondly, for researchers, it allows for recording and automatic transcription. Beyond these logistical advantages, Zoom shares with other digital platforms the ability to foster "real-time co-presence and interactivity" (Maddox, 2020). I found that Zoom facilitates particular novel intimacies. Because of the ability of both interviewer and interviewee to choose their spaces of interaction and their self-presentation, Zoom interviews tended to feel more relaxed and comfortable than their face-to-face equivalents. I carried out interviews from my study at the top of my house with a nice cup of tea and my space heater often in full flow. My interviewees were often found at home, surrounded by pets, children and back issues of their publications. In a few cases, they used the interview as an opportunity to give me tours of their newsrooms.

The Zoom environment also allowed for a distinctive intimacy: It enabled a single-handed focus on understanding the interviewees' ways of thinking and living. Some research has suggested that "Zoom fatigue" derives from the cognitive labour of monitoring your own self-presentation and managing conversation flow in a digital environment (Kirk & Rifkin, 2020). However, evidence also suggests that some respondents may feel more comfortable discussing personal issues in the comfort of their own homes, at a safe distance from the interviewer (Gray et al., 2020). This implies that the online interview

generates an interactional relationship that may be more akin to counselling, enabling interviewees to openly discuss their experiences in a setting free of judgement. What I found, more than anything, was that the very sparseness of the Zoom environment facilitating "active listening" (Louw, Todd & Jimarkon, 2011): In the absence of other stimuli, I was able to fully concentrate on reading my interviewees' verbal and non-verbal cues. Here, it is important to note that the practice of active listening is a privilege at any time and especially in the middle of the pandemic. The ability to work uninterrupted and with full focus is an invaluable resource which is unevenly distributed. Access to this resource is shaped by inequalities that have, as discussed above, only been exacerbated by the pandemic. I did my research interviews in deceptive peace and quiet: My 12-year-old son insisted that he must not be disturbed in his schoolwork, but it later turned out that he actually spent his days playing Minecraft with his friends while I was happily occupied with my fun interviews.

Ultimately, despite the immeasurable horror of the pandemic, the last year has also taught me adaptability. It showed that the best laid plans can be reimagined and transformed for the better, even when they may seem irretrievably lost. Though I was reluctant to be drawn into life on Zoom, I now don't know how I ever lived without it.

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[i] Note that the ethics approval for the modified project specified the use of Zoom, Skype or phone for interviews, and indicated that interviews provided that interviewees granted their consent. All consent forms were returned electronically prior to the interviews, and interviews began with confirmation of consent based on the consent form and the project information sheet. Interview recordings were subsequently transcribed by the project researcher, aided by otter.ai transcription software.