



“Minding the Gap”: Reflections on Media Practice & Theory

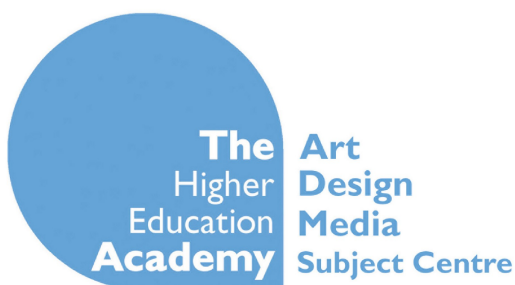
*Postgraduate & Early Career Researchers Training Day
Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, University of Oxford
Saturday 12th May 2007*

Convenors: Paddy Coulter (Reuters Institute) & Cathy Baldwin (ISCA)

Supported by:

*MECCSA Postgraduate Network (ADM-HEA),
Reuters Institute & ISCA, University of Oxford &
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A Return to the ‘Big’ Discourse : Interviewing History Documentary Makers

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This paper takes the form of a case study of my PhD research, structured by a number of stages of influence, where my professional life has changed the course of my research, interspersed with three provocative confessions regarding the consequences.

The main aim of the paper is to address one central question: to what extent should the personal experience of a media setting be utilised in the academic research of that setting, and what are the pitfalls of such an approach. To frame this question, I will invoke the idea of the ‘big discourse’ – the discourse used widely within the television industry, where a range of values, aims and causal relationships are glossed over, sometimes literally with the word ‘big’. To be bigger is not only to be better in this discourse, it stands as a symbol of closed doors and hidden agendas, and I both ran away from and towards this discourse during my research.

Introduction to my Study

I am studying the growth in history documentaries during the 1990s. Many observers have commented on this growth, but very few have tried to analyse it. Interestingly, the 1990s is a period in UK Television history in the UK which is known for a decline in ‘serious’ programming, of which history documentary could be considered to be one type. According to many critics (Curran and Seaton, 1997; Barnett and Seymour, 1999) the 1990 broadcast act, the increasing influence of multi-channel television, and the challenge of the internet to conventional television economics, led to a perceived lessening of programming quality, marked by a sharp increase in crime drama and soap opera, and a decline in forms such as current affairs and observational documentaries.

Documentary itself is seen to have been colonised and overthrown by infotainment forms such as docusoap and reality television (Corner, 2000; Dovey, 2000). The growth in history documentary is therefore potentially highly significant. It could offer either evidence in support of, or an antidote to, a narrative of lessening quality brought about by increased competition, or it could lead to new way of formulating such issues. In short, it seems a ripe area for investigating how political and economic changes to the TV industry have exerted pressure on programme makers in a highly specialised area.

It is into this context that my first stage of influence – that is, where my earlier career influenced the conception of my study - is to be located. My personal experience came into play in this project even before I took up my PhD studies at Aberystwyth. The fact that my career was directly responsible for deciding my research area, raises questions about my role.

My Career

Before I go on to talk about how my career influenced this research, I'll give a brief description of my career. I worked for a period of seven years between 1997 and 2003 in a variety of independent television production companies, mostly working in documentary production. Many of these companies had popped up in the wake of the creation of Channel 4 in 1982. But by 1997, these companies were involved in a changing marketplace, whose traditional forms and clients were disappearing, to be replaced by new industrial configurations. My role at these companies also varied; I began as a researcher, progressed to being a director and producer, and settled into the comfortable role of development manager. This last role was a business role as much as a creative or editorial role, explicitly in the area of history documentary. Whilst there, I was faced with the realities of getting ideas commissioned, often working on projects long before the camera started rolling. Whilst in a position of some influence over individual projects, I was also aware of the limits of any one person's power to steer events, unless they were in the very front rank of the practitioner community's hierarchy. This is where I encountered the 'big discourse' at its fullest tilt – as exemplified by anonymised quotations from my PhD field interviews:

- 'There was a **big** legislative change in 1990. The 1990 broadcasting act, I think more or less the last act that Thatcher signed.' (Ex BBC and C4 Commissioning Editor)
- 'You look at between 1970 and 1980, and you see that BBC is not **biggest** player.' (Ex BBC Executive Producer)
- 'You have the **big** set-piece special effects, and it has to go that way.' (Independent Producer)

This type of language can be problematic, regarding discussions of causation and intention, within the study of cultural production. Even when at work this drove me to distraction. I was aware that such a discourse was a kind of coded assault course, keeping the uninitiated out of the inner

sanctum. This frustration was also a symptom of my comparatively powerless position within the industry hierarchy, and it was a root cause of my move away from the industry towards academia. But how did this background affect the way in which I conducted my study? I shall now look at three separate moments in my research when this background had an effect; firstly in the conception of my hypothesis and topic area; secondly in my formulation of a methodology; and thirdly in the conduct of interviews with senior practitioners.

Conception of Hypothesis

Originally, when I decided to apply for a place at Aberystwyth University, my area of study was to be in documentary narratology. I had thought about looking at the theatrical renaissance of documentary. History documentary was now not at the forefront of my mind. I viewed it with disdain, due to the obfuscatory nature of the ‘big discourse’. But as I began to read and began to become re-acquainted with academia the history documentary started to become more attractive. I remember at the time asking myself why? Was I being pulled back into the ‘big discourse’. Was I finding it hard, after years of working in it, to escape its terms of reference? On one hand I justified my growing preoccupation with history documentary as seeking to answer a difficult academic question; on the other, I saw it as an opportunity to work through some deeply personal questions about my own role in the industry. But at this point I must make my first confession. I probably also saw that the study of history documentary represented a good opportunity to use a knowledge set I had acquired over many years as a way of changing careers and entering academia. But what were the advantages and disadvantages of such a decision in terms of research methods?

Conception of Methodology

The advantages of such a decision were numerous. Within my area of investigation, I’d have a head start in terms of a general chronology and understanding of the industry. I would be aware of the key personalities, sources and programmes. I had already analysed some of these key people and texts for business purposes in my earlier career. I could be a conduit through which an under-studied area of cultural production could be opened up for academic scrutiny. But there were also disadvantages. I only had a partial knowledge of one area of an industry which was linked to several other industries. I had been in a comparatively lowly position – how much access did I have to key decision makers, and to the key debates in the sector? The lack of existing academic work on this area was a problem, in that I would have to start from scratch, or significantly stretch an existing model of cultural production to fit. I was, finally, over reliant on what could be termed a

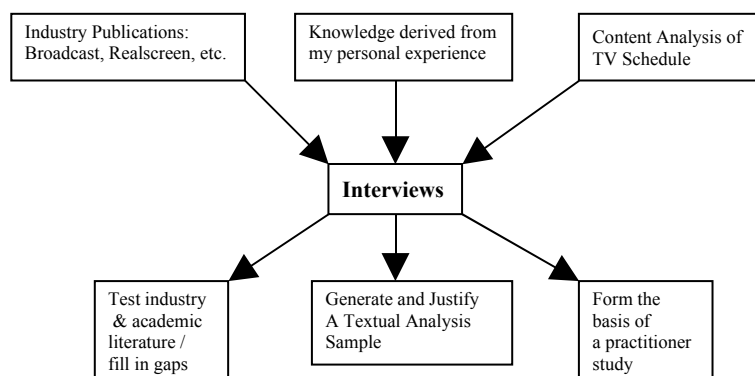
journalistically spurious claim of a ‘boom’ in history documentaries for the basis of my study, as there was in effect nowhere else for me to begin. Where did this leave me as a researcher in terms of ethics? Could I be objective in my study of an area I had been so close to: could I avoid over-emphasising my particular experience; would I just end up reproducing industrial myths?

This is where my second confession must be revealed. The way through this conundrum, what could be termed ‘the formulation of a theoretical framework’, came from another institutional discourse: that of academia. The supervision I received - and still very gladly receive - as a PhD student in my department encouraged me in a certain direction, towards the study of political economy and broadcasting policy, and away from the more text-based approach I’d previously envisaged. For me it was another sinfully expedient decision. The expertise available in the department that best fitted my research changed the direction of my research. But this raises questions. Was I pressurised by an institutional context into shoe-horning my research into a ready made academic model? What I am sure of is that my supervisors – who have been wonderful, I assure you – understood the significance of the history boom. They saw it in the context of other work, which enabled me to free myself from the restrictions of the history boom claim.

But most significantly, this change of direction, added to the lack of archive resources a political economic approach would usually require, sent me back into the arms of the ‘big discourse’ once more. The BBC’s 25-year embargo on their written archive, the lack of a Channel 4 written archive and the commercial confidentiality which barred me from using independent producers’ archives meant that in order to investigate the history producing community, I’d have to interview some of its key members, which brings me to my last section – the conduct of interviews.

Conduct of Interviews

My industry experience was again a double-edged sword in this area. On one hand I knew who the main players were, but didn’t always know how I knew. Whilst the independent sector, and the sector in the USA was something I’d had dealings with, the BBC was something of a mystery. So I turned to a mixture of sources that produced a list of interviewees for me.



This I think represents an interesting mix of influences, which worked well in creating a sample of interviewees who covered job descriptions, channels and periods within the 1982-2002 umbrella period.

However, my third confession is to do with the conduct of these interviews. The interviews were to be face to face, whenever possible, and due to the possible commercial and professional confidences involved, anonymity was to be offered. Advance questions would be sent out, in order that interviews run smoothly, and to make the best use of the limited time of busy executives and producers. The issue of the influence of my earlier career now focussed on the style of the interviews, and the choice of questions asked in the interviews. Firstly I proposed an informal set of questions, ones which I thought would fit in to the ‘big discourse’'s preoccupation with individual authorship and careers in an industry defined by teamwork and corporate authorship. My supervisors, thank the lord, intervened and proposed a far more systematic set of questions, which were predicated on the three basic research questions of my thesis. This list of questions, after transcription and inputting into a database, and with the development of a searchable code based on these questions, has been extremely useful, and it's forming the basis of more than one chapter of my thesis. However, there were problems. Several interviewees declined an interview due to the nature of the questions. Others initially agreed, and then reconsidered, citing the questions as their reasons for declining. And then when I was interviewing, I found myself being dragged back into the ‘big discourse’ again, as a gap in terminology between the industry and the academy became an issue. Some interviewees, despite being long-standing and senior members of the history documentary producing community were unaware or even factually inaccurate regarding the dates of significant legislation, channel launches, even the TX-es of their own programmes. In the act of

interviewing, the questions which promised to systematise my own reactions to the ‘big discourse’ seemed to be failing.

This is the substance of my third and final confession: I changed the interviewing regime, as I encountered these problems. I prompted answers, explained terms, suggested interim conclusions, and went back to the verities of the ‘big discourse’ - individual career progression and programme content – instead of sticking to the discourse I had planned. What was happening here? Was the ‘big discourse’ dragging me back in? Was it protecting itself against the systematic scrutiny of academic discourse? Or was I using my industrial background, now allied to my nascent academic background, to bridge a gap between discourses?

Conclusion

I have briefly taken you through some key stages in the development of my research, indicating where my professional experience came in useful, and where it raised serious questions. I have also made three confessions, and I’d like to end this paper by just reminding you of what they were:

1. I used a professional knowledge set I had acquired over many years as a way of changing careers and entering academia.
2. I allowed academic institutional discourse to frame my investigation.
3. I changed my methods when the results of my interviews were becoming problematic, exchanging systematic academic enquiry for greater flexibility and emotional appeal.

I’d like to end with the open question of whether my actions can be defended as part of the usual flexibilities required in media research, or whether these ‘sins’ represent a significant violation of methodological orthodoxy. Could you, or would you, defend my actions?

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