

Quality of qualitative research in the age of information abundance

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About me

- PhD candidate in quality of qualitative research
- Background in a little bit of everything (Liberal Arts)
- Now a research bureaucrat (more on that later)
- But in a previous life I analysed travel stories



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Back to the late 19th century: colonial expansion

- Political expansion
- Increased communication technology
- Anthropologists ventured out

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With this, anthropological heroism gained prominence

*“Imagine yourself suddenly set down surrounded by all your gear, **alone on a tropical beach** close to a native village, while the launch or **dinghy** which has brought you **sails away out of sight.**” (Malinowski, 1922, p.3)*

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From this, we moved on

- Communications technology improved further
- Knowledge expanded
- Research became democratized
- Colonialism became problematized



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*Research sites are being "used up" at a rapid rate. The observation that there are **more anthropologists but fewer traditional peoples** to study needs little comment. The increase in numbers of anthropologists has resulted in the **overloading of both informal and formal channels of communication.**" (Brown, 1981, p.413)*



Brown, P. J. (1981). Field Site Duplication: Case Studies and Comments on the "My-Tilbur" Syndrome. *Current Anthropology*, 22(4), 413-414.

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For Claude Lévi-Strauss, the fun was already over in the 1950s

*How I wish today that I had realized twenty years ago the full value of what we were given! **The unbelievable luxury**, that is to say: **the royal privilege** of sharing with eight or ten others exclusive rights over the first-class deck, cabins, smoking-room, and dining-room on a ship built to carry a hundred or a hundred and fifty passengers. [...] I happened, a few weeks ago, to make a certain telephone call. I had been playing with the idea of retrieving my youth by a return visit, after fifteen years, to Brazil. The answer was that **I should need to book my cabin four months in advance.** (Lévi-Strauss, 1955, pp.24-25)*



Levi-Strauss, C. (1955). *Tristes tropiques*. Criterion Books.

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At the same time

- Qualitative methodology developed and undid the mystery and authority, of the gentlemen scholars, and certain hypocrisies were exposed
 - Through the spirit of the 1960s
 - Alternative philosophical viewpoints



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Crisis of Representation

- Who has the power to represent someone else's story?



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How much did the details come to matter?

*"Diaries, even from the 1960s or 1970s, are rarities to be found in an archive with excitement. If I had been eleven in 1930 and had written extensively about the games I had played, it would have been a **meaningful source for historians of that period**. Such digital traces are now so ubiquitous that finding something specific among the available information is the real challenge. Rather than being scarce yet valuable, these posts are now so commonplace as to be a nuisance. Scarcity was frustrating, but **super-abundance** brings its own challenges."* (Milligan, 2019, p.9)



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Qualitative archives are now expanding as well



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How do we value the quality of qualitative research in this context?

- What does an interview mean in a large archive of interviews?
 - And an interview quote?
- What does an article, preprint, or white paper mean in an ever expanding collection of them?
- Breakdown of the fourth wall: people curate themselves



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Our research

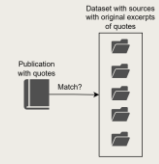


Salter, X.F.M., Gellman, J., Moore, G., Narayanan, S., Goot, C., Vrethorst, N., Wichama, J.M.


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Our research:

- Is a quote a quote, and if not, why?




*"Imagine yourself suddenly set down surrounded by all your gear, **alone on a tropical beach** close to a native village, while the launch or **dinghy** which has brought you **sails away out of sight**: sitting behind a computer all day and noting down if a participant quote has a comma instead of the original period from the transcript."*



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Much closer scrutiny


- Every small choice can be examined
 - Why this excerpt as quote?
 - Why take out this part of the excerpt?
 - Does the context of the excerpt fit the context of the researcher's argument?
- Every tiny mistake exposed
 - Quote assigned to wrong participant
 - A word is left out
 - Paraphrasing is not indicated



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Consequences

- Further disenchantment?
- Further bureaucratisation?
- More power to the participant?
- Less authority for the researcher?
- Which stories and narratives will survive?
- Which will drown in superabundance?



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Some questions that might be asked:

- "Why don't you just use the data that is already there"?
- "Why is this source in this moment in this place the best choice"?
- "Why this quote?"
- "Why should librarians spend their time and energy on curating these sources?"



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Could there be a rat race for ever more "authentic" voices?

- Travel stories are often about the uncurated, the raw



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To conclude: new complications to long term developments

"[the social scientist] *may ask: what would have happened if the author had done this or that with his data?*" (Glazer, 1962, p. 71)



Glazer, B. G. (1962). Secondary analysis: A strategy for the use of knowledge from research elsewhere. *Soc. Probl.*, 10, 70.

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