



"Minding the Gap": Reflections on Media Practice & Theory

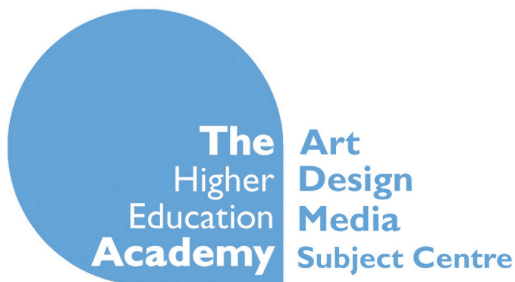
*Postgraduate & Early Career Researchers Training Day
Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, University of Oxford
Saturday 12th May 2007*

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

Supported by:

*MECCSA Postgraduate Network (ADM-HEA),
Reuters Institute & ISCA, University of Oxford &
Stanhope Centre for Communications Policy Research, London*

MeCCSA Postgraduate Network & Stanhope Centre do not have a centre view and do not aim to present one. The views expressed in this document are only those of its independent authors.



Dilemmas of Ethnographic Research: The Practitioner/Academic's Quandary

By Somnath Batabyal, Department of Media and Film Studies, SOAS. 133477@soas.ac.uk

Key words: oscillation, participant/insider, observer/outsider

Introduction

This paper examines the ethics of ethnographic research for a practitioner turned academic. It looks at the use of contacts in gaining entry into newsrooms, the ethics of observation and participation, the use of the experiential to draw out journalists in interviews, the employment of insider knowledge to attain proximity to news producers and the resultant ethics.

It will focus particularly on the facets of how the practitioner/academic presents the self as a subject, and also how people present themselves to him/her. This affects how the researcher imagines them as subjects. The crucial thing here is the Kantian distinction between viewing events from 'the inside' as opposed to 'the outside'. The latter treats people in terms of *knowledge* of their behaviour under objective conditions. The former attempts to *understand* them in terms of their own appreciation of the world. Where ethnography stands, with psychoanalysis, quite separate from all other approaches, is in working dialogically between the two.

I have been a journalist for nine years in India. I have worked with three national newspapers and a national weekly for seven years in New Delhi and for two years, I was the Bureau Chief in Kolkata for *NDTV*, which arguably is the most distinguished English news channel in the country. In September 2003, I took a year's sabbatical to come to SOAS for a Masters in the Anthropology of Media. Post the Masters, I had a job as a Special Correspondent waiting with *NDTV* in New Delhi but chose to stay back for a PhD, which dealt with the **Politics of News Production in Indian Television** and would be an ethnography of a national news channel.

I will focus on some key moments during fieldwork that highlights the practitioner/academic quandary and though bordering on the narrative, I think the insider/outsider dichotomy is best brought out through stories and examples rather than by theoretical refinements

The experiential influenced my choice of subject. My first choice of place was the *Star News* Headquarters in Mumbai and if possible, the Kolkata office of *Star Ananda*. The reason lies, both in the experiential as also the dynamics of the Rupert Murdoch-owned *Star Group* in India.

It might have perhaps been 'easier' to work with *NDTV Ltd* in New Delhi since I had already worked with them for two years, initially as Editorial Head of Kolkata and then as a Special Correspondent in New Delhi. But it was this proximity, which lead to abandoning the idea. I felt too close to it. I knew almost everyone and not only did I have an opinion on them, they also had an opinion on me. Some are friends, others I couldn't see eye to eye with and in a highly charged environment like the television newsroom, nothing is neutral. This cannot be conducive to good research.

The dynamics of *Star Ananda* and *Star News*, played no small part in making my choice, of course. The parent company, *MCCS*, is uniquely placed in today's multi-lingual television news environment in India, owning *Star News* and *Star Anando*, the latter being the first 24 hour Bengali news channel and now planning to add a Marathi news channel to its bouquet.

Rupert Murdoch relaunched *Star News* only in Hindi in 2003, from being a primarily an English language channel, it relaunched only in Hindi. 80 percent of the stocks were sold off to the *AnandaBazar Group*, a regional media conglomeration to bypass government regulations and *MCCS* was formed. In 2006, *Star Ananda*, the Bengali channel was launched. The dynamics of the 'glocal' were really being played out and I wanted investigate this moment.

Gaining Access

I used my practitioner experience to gain entry. I wrote to the head of the Anandabazar group from London detailing what I wanted and who I was. The editor of *Telegraph*, a paper owned by the ABP Group, whom I worked with earlier, advised me on this. I was told that Mr Sarkar, the owner, is an Anglophile and if I write from London, I shall be answered. I was answered and told to get in touch with the CEO of the company who said a yes to my considerable wish list.

Methodology

I was using a triangulation of methods, observation, depth interviews and content analysis. I was not a 'Participant' observer in the newsroom

I have been a participant in the newsroom. I was returning as an observer. I chose not to mix the two. In social research methods, much has been said for participant observation. Anthropology in the grips of a crisis had called for a more participatory engagement with subjects. One needed to understand the nuances of the life they are observing and while academic distance is necessary, a plunge into the 'real' is advocated. But I already knew the nuances. For me, the difficulty was in negotiating the distance. Despite prior determination to maintain distances, this was indeed difficult, as I needed to invoke my own journalistic affiliation and experience to get people to talk as also play out my academic stature with others.

Kolkata

I worked in the Kolkata office of *Star Ananda* for four months at the beginning of 2006. *Star Ananda* is the first 24-hour news channel in Kolkata. I had come to Kolkata fresh from SOAS, all my theoretical and ethical understanding of news sharpened by two years of work in the library. On the first day Yuvraj, the head of *Star Anando* in Kolkata told me that he wants the channel to be like Coke. The poorest to the richest in India all partake of the drink. I felt lost. I was judgemental and it took me time to shed the academic cloak. It wasn't easy when people dismissed the public sphere and talked only of television ratings. But through several interviews, I have obtained over 40 interviews in Kolkata and 45 in Mumbai, and I slowly started piecing together what I felt were the processes behind news production.

But something eluded me. I was the outsider. I could not piece together the power relations, the politics, peer group pressures within *Star Anando* that is so vital and ingrained in every newsroom. Until then, I had maintained academic distance. I had kept updating my supervisors with reports from the field. My second supervisor, Dr Mark Hobart wrote to me saying 'Sod academic distance. Get your hands dirty.' And I decided to switch hats.

I realised personal relationships had to be built, people befriended. My initial contact was Yuvraj. I decided to get to know him. I invited him for a drink and dinner to say thanks for arranging my

work. He agreed to make it quick. We started at 8 pm and went on till 4 am. I reached home at 5 in the morning, and tried to key in on my computer all that I could remember. My mother found me in the morning sprawled on my desk.

Through the evening, Yuvraj told me about the politics in the office, his problems, identified people who were threatening him and so on. I could direct the talk in that direction since I could identify to him casually who were threatening him as I knew how office politics work. He also knew I knew several senior journalists in Delhi and thus was part of the community. That first day which was calculated resulted in a bonding. He called me recently to seek advice on switching jobs and to put him in touch with people in Mumbai, people who were former colleagues. Throughout my work in Mumbai, Yuvraj stayed in touch. He was my informer in Kolkata, I played the same role for him in Mumbai. The relationship continues.

Mumbai

There were several key moments in Mumbai and it is difficult to highlight one or two. One of the most important thing in Mumbai was that I was located in the Corporate office. This section I was never involved in. I understood the market dynamics of a news organisation, how products are sold, how a channel is marketed, how branding is done and so on.

Examples: the Bureau Chief of Mumbai was also their chief Crime Reporter Jitendra Dixit. I introduced myself to him. I had been a crime reporter and for some time was quite active working on the Mumbai underworld. The top Mumbai policeman had been an old friend and we had worked quite closely together.

Dixit was initially reticent and questioned my earlier work. We were sitting having a cup of tea and the moment I mentioned that I knew Sivanandan, the policeman, Dixit called him. He first said hello and said that he had a surprise for him. Someone who claims to be a friend of his was sitting besides him. When Sivanandan asked my identity, Dixit looked at me smiling and mentioned my name. I was worried. It had been six years since I had last met him. Our relationship was professional. Sivanandan asked the phone to be handed to me, invited me for a drink and dinner. Dixit asked me to call him Jeetu and provided with reams of data and insight.

There was another point where I quite shamelessly let rumours around me circulate.

This is a generalisation for a billion people and will be empirically impossible to prove. Indians believe in connections, or at least there is a perception that if you are connected you can get by. So the big question in *MCCS* Mumbai was ‘**Whom** does he know’? I had to be well connected to have been granted the kind of access that I had. The first rumour that started was that I was close to the top management in the Anandabazar Group, which holds majority stakes in the company. This rumour led itself credibility as I was a Bengali and the Group Headquarters are in Kolkata, West Bengal. Initially, I tried to explain that phone calls and emails facilitated my entry. People laughed at it. Even friends. I also found that the rumour had its good effects. Unsure of who I was, everyone wanted to play safe and chat with me.

The other rumour was that I was a spy planted by Uday Shankar, the CEO of *MCCS* to keep a finger on the happenings within the office. Though no one could seriously have believed this one, it led to further ambiguity to my presence. The fact that I did just send an email to the Chairman of Anandabazar and then followed it up by repeated emails to the CEO of *MCCS* was seemed unbelievable to everyone. I had to be connected.

Another interesting example is my relationship with Shahzi Zaman, Managing Editor of *Star News* which was a tricky one. At the onset, he was co-operative. He introduced me to people and asked them to facilitate my work. But as the weeks progressed and he saw me spending more and more time with his colleagues and in the editorial room, I felt he started getting very cagey.

When an induction programme for a group of 13 trainees was being held, I asked Shahzi if I could sit in through some of it. Shahzi refused. This was the first and only time he categorically refused permission. But by this time, I had made several friends. I was advised to give Shahzi’s talk a skip and sit through everything else, which I did. I had become a conspirator against the *Star News* boss and people within Star News were helping me.

Conclusion

This brings me to the concluding section of this paper. This paper has tried to focus on the constant oscillation between the insider and the outsider, the constantly shifting role between participation and observation, which I had to adopt as a researcher. You cannot be a participant in the newsroom unless you feel the peer pressure, the back stabbing the hostilities, the politics and the bickering for rewards. A researcher is subjected to none of these. However much time a researcher spends in a newsroom, one can never really be a part of the newsroom dynamics.

I am convinced that had I not had a career in journalism, this research would have been approached differently and the results would have differed. Then again, if not for my fledgling academic career, I could not have possibly conceived of this work. I do not know which played a greater role, nor do I think that degrees here are important.

The Russian literary theorist, Mikhail Bakhtin talks about the concept of ‘live entering’ where one forgets nothing and brings everything to a new culture. ‘In this process one simultaneously renounces and exploits one’s surplus; one brings into interaction both perspectives simultaneously and creates an ‘architectonics’ of vision reducible to neither. This architectonics produces new understanding.’ (Morson and Emerson, 1990: 54). For me, when I entered into academia, it was a whole new culture. I brought to it the skills journalism instils, a respect for deadlines, searching for the new and alacrity. When I re-entered the world of television journalism, this time as a researcher, I came back trained in the rigours and critical approach academia demands. The resultant ‘architectonics’ of these two worlds, is this work.

Bibliography:

Morson, G. S & Emerson, C (1990) *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics*. Stanford University Press: Stanford