Response to Annette Markham

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As Annette Markham argues in her chapter, ‘we all exist in places that shape our perspectives on the world’. In particular, the modes of our situatedness that are relevant to our work as researchers include (at least) our disciplinarities and place-specificities. In this response I would like to focus more closely on important issues from my own situated perspective as a technology researcher based in Australia:

• The location you do research from is as important to any consideration of the local and the global as the location you do research in.

• Definitions of ‘global’ may be quite different for people who are differently positioned with respect to mainstream western modes, and a focus on globalization, as a process with attendant political and economic structures of privilege, can be more useful than looking at the global in terms of unifying perspectives through comparative research.

• Our situatedness gives us a sense of feeling at home in particular places and times, but as researchers we have a responsibility to research practices that are dialogical and creative and which stretch our comfort zones.

As Donna Haraway points out in her influential essay ‘Situated Knowledges,’ there is an ethical dimension to the situated nature of a research practice that is aware of its own situated and embodied nature. Arguing “against various forms of unlocatable, and so irresponsible, knowledge claims” (1991, p. 191), Haraway suggests that the unlocatable fantasy of infinite vision “is an illusion, a god-trick” (1991, p. 189). We need to have “a
critical practice for recognizing our own ‘semiotic technologies’ for making meanings, and a non-nonsense commitment to faithful accounts of a ‘real’ world, one that can be partially shared and friendly to earth-wide projects of finite freedom, adequate material abundance, modest meaning in suffering, and limited happiness’ (1991, p. 187). For Haraway, such a research practice necessarily “privileges contestation, deconstruction, passionate construction, webbed connections, and hope for transformative systems of knowledge and ways of seeing” (1991, p. 191).

As Markham points out, we inevitably privilege our own situated perspectives, since they are the centre of our world-view, but that by “examining one’s local premises, situated in a physical locale and saturated with certain particularities,” we may come to “recognize how one’s work is situated in larger contexts.” This generally involves, in my own experience as a qualitative researcher, the ongoing development of a willingness and commitment to stretching the bounds of one’s personal comfort zone. It’s not always easy to do this, since it involves living with a sense of intellectual uncertainty and self-questioning, and there are certainly times when, not infrequently, one wonders whether the effort is worthwhile.

My own situatedness certainly has had a significant impact on the research I’ve conducted and published. My physical location, based at a university in the western suburbs of Sydney, Australia, is one dimension of this specificity. Here in Australia, the scholarly community is highly aware of the ‘tyranny of distance’ manifested in the expense and time needed to travel outside the country to conferences and for face-to-face collaboration. While information and communications technologies have transformed the possibilities for feeling connected with our academic networks, it is still the case that
time-zone differences, particularly between Australia and Europe and the US, intervene in the flow of communication, slowing down the dynamic pace of communication that is possible with more synchrony.

The question posed by this book’s chapter interrogates the notions of the ‘global’ in relation to studies of new digital technologies. What does the ‘global’ mean? How can we use qualitative methods to address global concerns? How can we produce research that is meaningful and relevant to a global audience?

From the point of view of the ‘antipodes’ (literally the points diametrically opposite their points of reference on the globe) these questions seem much more ambitious and less readily achievable than concerns about processes of globalisation, or transnational aspects of life in a relatively isolated locale. Terms such as ‘globalizing’ or ‘globalization’ seem more useful than the ‘global’ as a thing-in-itself, because they can be defined in terms of processes that impact across all ranges of geographic scale.

An important strand in the literature on ICTs (information and communication technologies) deals directly with the issue of the relationship between the local and the global (see for example Miller and Slater’s (2000) ethnographic study based in Trinidad and the UK; Holloway and Valentine’s (2003) study of the cybergeographies of children’s online and offline worlds; or Hine’s (2000) study of the way the internet is made meaningful in local contexts). But is it important to include the global as a dimension in our research? Perhaps not. From the geographic periphery of the globe, in English-speaking population terms, if not in terms of centrality to academic cultural networks, the urge to ‘be global’ seems less urgent than the need to understand one’s neighbours. Following Bauman, Markham suggests that to understand our place in the
global we must become ‘a nomad who makes a home at the crossroads of culture’. For pragmatic as well as intellectual reasons, many Australian scholars are increasingly developing an orientation towards academic networks in Asia and the Pacific. Scholars from the global South continue to point out that much research written in English continues to be Western- or Euro-centric. Language is certainly a barrier, as English-speaking scholars generally don’t have access to the writing of scholars in languages other than English.

Markham asks how one can be more global in one’s research. One could question the desirability of a more global focus in the research we undertake. Even within what seem like very local contexts, say the western suburbs of Sydney with its population of less than 2 million, heterogeneities proliferate at all levels of scale. Diversities of social formation mean that, in practice, things seem to become more rich and interesting as one focuses closer into the local. Arguably, there is now no place in the world where transnational (rather than global) connections are not fundamental to the processes which are producing local specificities. Perhaps by becoming ‘more local’ in one’s research we can dig down to gain greater insights about the specific connections between disparate dimensions of local contexts, and gain greater understanding of their dynamics and processes.

What is needed is better understanding of the local, lived experience of people who may be geographically near but culturally far. Qualitative research, at its best, conveys not just factual observations but generates empathy in its readers for the subjects of the research. In Local Knowledge, anthropologist Clifford Geertz elaborates the relationship between ‘experience-near’ and ‘experience-far’ concepts (1983, p. 57). The challenge in
qualitative research is “to grasp concepts that, for other people, are experience-near, and to do so well enough to place them in illuminating connection with experience-distant concepts theorists have fashioned.” This is a task “at least as delicate, if a bit less magical, as putting oneself into someone else’s skin” (p. 58). The massive popularity of reality television over the past few years provides good indication of the receptivity of mass audiences to media forms which approach the ‘ethnographic’ in their depictions of what they observe, no matter how constructed the representations may be to conform to traditional narrative forms and conventions (e.g., the genre of soap opera).

Researching technology

How well do our studies fit within the larger conversations? This is a key question. What value will our work have in five years, 15 years, 150 years? The findings of research must be useful to other scholars, and to the wider society. Our research must provide insights that are ‘generalisable,’ in the sense that other scholars will find them applicable to the (situated) fields that they study. The application of sound, tried and tested methodologies for data collection and analysis, that is, those for which there is a widespread consensus about their utility, ensures a level of quality control in the process. When we speak of soundness or ‘rigour’ in our research processes, we mean, because research is a social activity, that we are speaking within frameworks of discourse and action that are accepted by a community of scholars.

In my own work on home computers (Lally 2002), my concern to relate the particular and local observations I was making of the people in my study, in combination with the disciplinary background outlined above, led me to discuss domestic ICTs from
the point of view of several different contexts. I related home computers to other domestic appliances and consumer goods, and drew connections to more general concerns expressed in academic literatures on consumption and mass production of material culture. I related home computers to trends in technological development, via the history of computers as business and educational technologies and the changes entailed by incorporating them into homes, including transformations in their marketing. Finally, I considered computers from the point of view of how we make ourselves ‘at home’ in our domestic environments (and elsewhere), to the point that an affective and practical relationship of ownership is enabled. From the point of view of this final context, although I was dealing with a technology that was outmoded (in terms of contemporary culture) by the time I had finished writing about it, this particular case study had contributed to my own developing understanding of how we construct and maintain our sense of being ‘at home’ in the world.

Our sense of belonging to and feeling at home in the spaces and times we inhabit in our everyday lives is:

inextricably linked with practices and practical knowledges because it involves being able to marshal a set of narratives, ... appropriate segments of the object world (almost inevitably including nowadays all manner of consumer goods), a repertoire of bodily stances, and so on. Together, these resources generate a ‘sense of belonging’, a feeling that the agent does not have to qualify as a member of a network, being already competent in its spaces and times. (Glennie and Thrift 1996, p. 41)
It is the everyday practices and practical knowledges of the participants that we are attempting to understand in our qualititative studies. But it is also the case that, as researchers, our sense of belonging to academic networks and fields of study is based on a sense of being competent in these particular spaces and times. We can think of this sense of at-homeness in the everyday social and cultural environments we inhabit as academics/researchers as a kind of ‘comfort zone’.

There is a lot at stake in maintaining a comfort zone as a stable zone of everyday living. Giddens uses the term ‘ontological security’ to refer to “the confidence that most human beings have in the continuity of their self-identity and in the constancy of the surrounding social and material environments of action” (1990, p. 92). Ontological security, as Markham found out in the US Virgin Islands, is only ever a fragile illusion, maintained by our trust in the continuity of our material, social and technological environments.

The sense of intellectual uncertainty I mentioned above in discussing the situatedness of our knowledge production as researchers, is always, I believe, a reliable indicator of a comfort zone that is indeed being stretched as we attempt to come to terms with the complexities of research sites and materials, endeavour to achieve new insights into their structures and dynamics, and hope for a favourable reaction to the written results given to others to review.

**Reflexivity and creativity as part of the research process**

To what extent is it possible to achieve reflexivity as a researcher? Markham describes it as “like trying to look at yourself looking in the mirror.” Reflexivity necessitates a commitment to sticking with uncertainties and recognising that one’s own perspective
might be skewed. Research participants\(^1\) are themselves the experts in their own life-world. We need to find ways of challenging our preconceptions about what they may tell us, but, importantly, reflexivity is only one part of this process. We need to find ‘tricks’ to bring what we may be taking for granted to the fore, and often these are part of our methods. Focus groups, for example, by putting participants in dialogue with each other, can tell us things that an in-depth interview might not reveal.

Indeed, Markham gives an illuminating example of her discussion with the student studying Dominican newsgroups. The mutual surprise stood out for me as a diagnostic indicator of the disjuncture between the frames of reference and taken for granted ‘common sense’ of both teacher and student. By trying to open up the student’s thinking through questioning, Markham exemplifies a pedagogic style which has been referred to as *maieutic* inquiry (Dimitrov and Hodge 2002, p. 15). Originally developed by Socrates, maieutic inquiry (from the Greek work for ‘midwifery’) proceeds by asking questions in a way that brings about the birth of new ideas in the student (hence Socrates’ use of this term). It draws out of students a knowledge which is already latent within them, in potential if not actual form. While this mode of interaction is common in research pedagogy, it is also a critical component, to success in the field, as we utilize the qualitative methods of in-depth interviews and focus groups.

Maieutic inquiry takes the form of dialogue, and is a process which reveals the limits of available knowledge and facilitates the emergence of new insights. “If such an emergence occurs, the inquirer and respondent move together beyond the limits of what was considered known by them before initiating the process of inquiry” (Dimitrov and

\(^1\) I prefer the term ‘participants’ to ‘informants’ because the latter seems to imply a level of privilege on the part of the researcher.
Hodge 2002, p. 15). It is important that the questioner admits the possibility that her knowledge is limited, and that the student or interviewee has independent expertise.

Participants often surprise us in interviews, and one of the most fulfilling experiences in qualitative research is this sense of surprise and wonder. Participants are the experts in their own reality and our qualitative research methods are often designed facilitate their own reflexivity – sometimes to the point of them becoming co-researchers, as in the methodology of participatory or action research (see overviews of these methods in Denzin’s and Lincoln’s *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 2000, 2005). When participants say something surprising, it often feels like being given a precious gem, or nugget of gold.

In my home computer study, for example, a retired schoolteacher referred to her PC and the skills it had allowed her to develop as giving her “a handle on the future.” As she used this phrase, I knew immediately that it was both a wonderful turn of phrase (which became a chapter heading in the writing and part of a conference paper title), but also that it was like the tip of the iceberg, indicating the existence of a much larger truth (Lally 2002, chapter 4). As I told other older participants about this phrase, it emerged that they could all identify to some extent with this sense that computing could give them control over their lives and futures, and I found that it resonated for many other study participants too, especially those who had encountered computing as adults, and who had a sense that it was important to keep up with technological developments or risk being “left behind.”

It’s important, I feel, to follow your instincts as an interlocutor with study participants. Another indicator that something very interesting is going on, I have argued, is laughter in the interview context. Laughter can often be read as an indication that there
are underlying contradictions or paradoxes that we tacitly agree not to try to resolve, such as a contradiction between what we say we believe and what we actually do. Examples from my own work include attitudes towards software piracy (Lally 2002, p. 90), a child’s exploitation of a parent’s goodwill (p.140) and game playing and mothers’ roles within the family (Mitchell, 1985, p. 124; Lally, 2002, p. 160).

What we take for granted is just that, and perhaps no amount of reflexivity is going to give us the ‘aha’ moment that the storm gave Annette through the sudden loss of power. An undermining shock to ontological security, as Markham experienced it, is certainly something which can cause a total rethink, in order to incorporate a new perspective into a world-view. But it’s really the reflexive thinking and investigation that we engage in after such an ‘aha’ moment that counts, and which can give us profound insights into our situation in the world.

Importantly, research is a creative process. As Negus and Pickering point out, creative activity is not just about designing and manufacturing artworks or commodities, but is about making collective meaning, and communicating our shared experience: “Creativity is a process which brings experience into meaning and significance, and helps it attain communicative value” (2004, p. vii). Through creative activity we combine and recombine symbolic resources in novel ways, so that they tell us something we haven’t heard before, or had only dimly recognised. Further, partial and situated perspectives are no barrier to the creative process: “Creativity often builds on the shards and fragments of different understandings. … we don’t just collaborate with people; we also collaborate with the patterns and symbols people create” (Schrage, 1990, p. 41). By actively engaging with new contexts of our social, cultural and technological lives, as researchers
we achieve new ways for creating and sharing our ideas, our view of the world, and our unique experiences.

Recommended reading

For classics works of ethnographic writing, any of Clifford Geertz’s work can be recommended: *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (2003, Basic Books) is a beautifully written and engaging collection of essays on how to study and write about local cultures in broader context. For ethnographic approaches to the internet see Hine’s *Virtual Ethnography* (2000, Sage Publications) and Miller and Slater’s *The Internet: An Ethnographic Approach* (2000, Berg).

For empirically-based studies of information technologies in family and domestic contexts, see Lally’s *At Home with Computers* (2002, Berg), and Bakardjieva’s *Internet Society: the Internet in Everyday Life* (2005, Berg). Livingstone’s *Young People and New Media: Childhood and the Changing Media Environment* (2002, Sage) provides an excellent mapping of children and young people’s use of a variety of media, both old and new. Holloway and Valentine (*Cyberkids: Children in the Information Age*, 2003, RoutledgeFalmer) draw on extensive empirical research to explore children’s engagement with ICTs from a cultural geographic perspective.

Moores’ *Media and Everyday Life in Modern Society* (2000, Edinburgh University Press) situates ICTs within the context of older media forms, including television, radio and telephones, and investigates the position these media play in everyday life and relationships. For recent Australian perspectives on this issue, see the collections edited by Cunningham and Turner (*The Media and Communications in Australia*, Allen & Unwin, 2006) and Goggin (*Virtual Nation: The Internet in Australia*, 2004, University of New South Wales Press).

References


