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(Inter)visibility: A rejoinder to “Collecting qualitative data during a pandemic” by David Silverman

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Introduction

I cannot say that the COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically reduced my opportunities to do research. If anything, as a scholar of language and digital media, the way the pandemic has pushed more and more social interaction online has increased the range of phenomena I am drawn to focus on. The pandemic has also introduced a raft of new communication challenges for public health officials and healthcare workers, service providers of all kinds, and individuals just trying to get through the day in the context of various and sundry forms of ‘lockdown’ and

‘social distancing’, communication challenges which, quite frankly, are grist for the mill for a discourse analyst. At the same time, I have, as have most of us, become acutely aware of the ways in which shifting to online-only interactions with my research participants has affected what I am able to learn from and about them. I am also painfully aware of how it has changed the kinds of relationships I can form and maintain with them, and the way power is distributed in these relationships.

Not all of these effects have been negative. As David Silverman points out in his essay, doing fieldwork at a distance has forced many of us to think of creative new techniques for tapping into the experiences of others, many of which shift power to participants as they take on responsibilities for data gathering and for determining what kind of data is important. But there are also obvious constraints. Some of these constraints have their roots in human communication itself, such as the difficulties we sometimes have picking up on subtle contextualization cues over Zoom. Others come from the platforms and protocols we use for conducting ethnography online, which can in many cases have the effect of disempowering our participants, making it more difficult for them to control what they want to make visible and what they want to keep to themselves.

And then there are those who disappear – participants who, for one reason or another, fall through the virtual cracks, and entire research enterprises that have to be put on hold. One such enterprise for me was a project I have been conducting with foreign national prisoners at a prison in the south of England. Not only was visiting the prison rendered out of the question by the pandemic, but even online communication was not a viable Plan B for prisoners who were not

permitted any access at all to the internet or mobile phones even before the pandemic. The best I could do was pass messages via staff members. The worst thing, though, was not just losing contact, but losing the relationships with the prisoners that I had spent over a year cultivating. By the time I am able to get back to the prison, many of them will have moved on, been transferred, released, or deported. Examples like this, however, highlight not just how the pandemic has stymied certain kinds of research, but also how it has often rendered the marginalised and invisible members of our societies even more marginalised and invisible. For these prisoners, going months without being able to talk to a researcher was the least of their problems compared to months of no contact with parents, spouses and children.

The most important outcome of this experience for me has been to reinforce a conviction that I have carried through my work for the past three decades: that *mediation* matters, that the media through which we interact with people, whether they be our friends, our children or our research participants, are not merely devices that transmit information from one person to another. They are architectures for interaction that fundamentally change what we can do, who we can be, and the kinds of relationships we can have with people (Norris and Jones 2005; Scollon 1998). In this regard, the contingencies of social distancing and the new possibilities for fieldwork from afar that the pandemic has forced us to confront present to us an even greater opportunity to critically evaluate all of the different mediational means we use in our research, both technological (recording devices, software programs) and discursive (field-notes, transcripts), to understand their inevitable effects on what (and who) is made visible in the context of our research and what (and who) is rendered invisible. An online interview is not just a ‘replica’ of a face-to-face interview. It is an altogether different sort of social occasion, not necessarily better or worse, not

necessarily less ‘normal’, as Christian Schmieder (quoted in Silverman’s article) points out, but definitely different, and if we ignore the differences, we will severely limit our ability to make sense of ‘what’s going on’ and what people are saying.

Thinking about these differences within a framework of visibility, I want to argue, gives us a way of thinking about how media change not just what we can find out but also the ways power and vulnerability are distributed in our research practices, and in our societies more generally.

Visibility is not just at the heart of any research process— it is at the heart of social life itself, the core of our epistemologies, our identities, our relationships and our politics.

‘Withs’ and ‘watches’

Like everyone else I have had to conduct my teaching almost completely online for the better part of a year, and like most other teachers I have talked to, it drives me crazy when my students refuse to turn their cameras on. I also find it completely understandable. Full frontal visibility in a box on a computer screen is very different from the kinds of visibility students enact in the classroom where most people’s attention is directed at others, not them, and where, when they are being scrutinised, they at least have a sense of how others are responding to them. In online video conferencing, anyone with their camera on becomes a bit of a spectacle, which is exactly how I feel when I am the only one visible. I feel like my students are watching me but not really ‘with’ me.

Visibility, as I am thinking about it here, is not just about the physical sense of seeing, but seeing is still a big part of it. The sociologist Georg Simmel (1921 [1908]) claimed that reciprocal

contact through mutual gaze enables a kind of direct understanding of the other as an individual rather than as a member of a group or category. Goffman (1963) also stressed that it is often sight rather than sound (or speech) which is most important for the organisation of social encounters. It is not just a matter of the experience of being able to see other people, but also of being able to experience how one is being seen, and to be seen seeing the other. ‘Ordinarily,’ Goffman (1963: 16) writes, ‘to use our naked senses is to use them nakedly and to be made naked by their use’. This, admittedly, is one reason we sometimes prefer just to send a text. The kind of richness that the mutual monitoring possibilities of face-to-face interaction affords does not necessarily make it a ‘better’ form of interaction for all occasions.

What I am more interested in here is the sense of being ‘with’ other people that is at the heart of most understandings of ethnography, and the *inter*-visibility and mutual vulnerability that is part of ‘being with’. Of course, sometimes that sense of ‘being with’ others is the last thing that is desired. We may, for example, want access to recordings of interactions in which our presence might actually interfere with ‘what’s going on’. But, as Silverman reminds us, for many ethnographers ‘being with’ others is a central part of how they gather data. It is not just about the quality of the data we can collect. ‘Being with’ someone also implies a certain kind of relationship and a certain set of responsibilities.

For Goffman (1963), ‘being with’ someone constitutes the most basic unit of social interaction. To be part of what he calls a ‘with’ affords certain kinds of rights to people in their dealings with others, certain kinds of expectations of reciprocity, as well as certain protections from intrusion from people not perceived to be part of the ‘with’. Building on Goffman’s idea of the ‘with’,

Scollon (1998) proposes a complementary kind of interaction unit which he calls a 'watch', which occurs when the reciprocity of a 'with' tilts sharply to one side, when one part of the 'with' becomes a spectacle and the other becomes the audience. Examples of watches include dramatic performances, striptease shows, and my own online tutorials when my students refuse to turn their cameras on. The main characteristic of 'watches' is power asymmetry, though the nature of that asymmetry is complex and can vary across contexts. In some cases power adheres to the audience, as it does to a guard watching a prisoner, and in others it adheres to the spectacle, as it does to a performer who has the audience 'eating out of his hand'. Most social interactions are really combinations of 'withs' and 'watches' with the parties negotiating moment by moment the degree of symmetry or asymmetry in their mutual monitoring practices, and consequentially, the kinds of power relationships they enact. We do this, as Goffman (1963) has said, with the aid of various interaction rituals, through which who gets to watch whom can be comfortably calibrated. We also do it with the aid of various kinds of 'equipment' that allow us to control the parts of us we make available to the scrutiny of others and gain access to certain parts of the people with whom we are communicating.

In a way, a good ethnographer is someone who is skilful in negotiating inter-visibility in a way that makes participants feel that they are part of a 'with' rather than merely a spectacle, someone who is good at balancing the participation ('with') and the observation ('watch') halves of participant observation. I am not saying that this negotiation is necessarily less possible in online interactions. Indeed, much of my work has explored how people use digital technology to create a sense of 'being with' (Jones 2008, 2012). What I am saying is that the way this negotiation takes place is necessarily different when we are using different equipment. Different kinds of

interaction rituals are involved, and different kinds of competences are necessary, and we need to be aware of this if we are to be able to maintain that delicate balance between participation and observation.

But there are also other aspects of using online platforms that are more difficult for us to control, in particular, who else might be watching. The use of any digital platform raises questions about how the platform might alter the participation frameworks of our interactions. Might there, for example, be listeners present of whom we are not aware? How 'private' is the communication? To what degree does the use of the platform require us and our participants to relinquish personal data to an internet company? What are the possible drawbacks of the 'persistence' associated with digital communication? How much control do our participants have over what gets recorded and what does not, and by whom? What sorts of literacies are we demanding from our participants in order to maintain control of their 'information preserves', and are these the literacies that are available to them?

And finally, there are those who inevitably become invisible, simply because they do not have access to the equipment necessary to participate. These include not just people who cannot afford computers or internet connections, but also people like prisoners who are not allowed access to them, and also students who might really want to turn their cameras on but do not have a good enough internet connection to do so. Just as resources for inter-visibility are often unequally distributed in interactions, they are also unequally distributed across society.

Seeing like a researcher

The point I am trying to make is that in the midst of the disruptions to our research practices brought about by the pandemic, and in the face of the opportunities that digital media promise for new kinds of data collection and new forms of fieldwork, the most important thing to remember is that media contexts are not interchangeable. Different architectures for interaction inevitably result in different kinds of interactions. It is not just that by changing one's mode of data collection one is changing the kinds of data one can collect and the analytical choices one needs to make about it. One is also changing the kinds of relationships they can have with their participants because of the different possibilities for mutual monitoring that different platforms make available.

At the same time, we must also remember that the structures of inter-visibility we attempt to negotiate with participants online inevitably develop in the context of larger ecosystems of visibility associated with digital media that people are just beginning to become aware of and trying to figure out how to resist. These new media ecosystems are dominated by platforms, algorithms, and machine learning protocols that themselves create particular kinds of visibility and particular possibilities for observation. They are environments in which, as Birchall (2016: 2) observes, we can never escape being 'envisioned ('veiled' and hailed) as auditing and entrepreneurial subjects.'

The most important thing about any kind of research context — whether digital or analogue, close-up or from afar—is understanding the structures of inter-visibility within which we are working and which we ourselves are helping to create. What are the affordances and constraints of these structures of inter-visibility for the creation of knowledge, for the exercise of ethics, and for the possibilities for empowerment on the part of our participants?

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