Data gold vs. Career suicide: Power relations and ethical dilemmas in workplace ethnography

This article investigates the power relations and ethical dilemmas at play within three workplace ethnographic studies of local television stations, conducted as part of my PhD studies. The research on which this article is based involved periods of non-participant observation in three local television stations; face-to-face, telephone and email interviews with leaders, producers, journalists, volunteers and partners; and analysis of organizational documents, broadcast schedules and media content. The data presented in this article were collected between July 2013 and February 2015.

Several dilemmas relating to ethics and power relations encountered during fieldwork are analysed including the challenges of negotiating access from near and far; maintaining anonymity within a small field; identifying and acknowledging researcher bias; unrealistic or uncertain participant expectations of the researcher and research process; and the need to be sensitive to workplace relations and career trajectories. The analysis reveals the importance of multi-faceted participant motivations and of the need for researcher credibility and empathy in order to build trust and manage expectations. The paper concludes that, in this study, ethnography alone offered the opportunity to develop a more egalitarian, mutually-beneficial researcher-participant relationship which would enable both the championing of the sector as well as more critical evaluation of organizational leadership and practice and the wider policy and regulatory environment.

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About the author

Kerry Traynor is a researcher-practitioner-consultant to the creative industries in the North West of England, specializing in small and micro-business and social enterprise. She is currently reading for a PhD in the social, cultural and democratic impacts of local television at the Institute of Cultural Capital, a strategic collaboration between Liverpool John Moores University and the University of Liverpool. Her research interests include local television, community media, digital cultures, digital inclusion, co-production, corporate governance, non-profits, social enterprise, social justice, cross-capital analysis, impact evaluation, ethnography, audience and action research.