

Power Point and the Crafting of Social Data

NINA WAKEFORD

University of Surrey, UK

In this paper I suggest that we should take a closer look at how we use PowerPoint. Authoring and presenting via PowerPoint is an invisible yet pervasive part of the work involved in corporate ethnography. Rather than being a pointer to a text elsewhere PowerPoint both produces the evidence of having done the ethnographic work as well as being expected to constitute the ethnographic analysis. The challenge of such software is not that it offers the wrong cognitive style, but that presentations are 'thick' social events, rather than 'thin' devices for knowledge transfer. Drawing on recent writing in Science and Technology Studies, these thick events can be thought of as continually creating hybrids or co(a)gents. In order to maintain a critical and reflexive practice we need to develop ways of keeping open the relationship between the researcher and the PowerPoint, such as leaving traces of our own relationship to the participants within the slides, or experimenting with different kinds of time-based media.

Introduction: Alignment and Ambivalence

In the light of the relentless pervasiveness of Microsoft PowerPoint in many contemporary organisations, we might be tempted to avoid giving this software package any more attention than is necessary to deliver our presentations. Despite debates about genre (Yates & Orlikowski, forthcoming), its visibility (Crang, 2003; Matlass, 2003; Rose 2004) and its cognitive style (Tufte, 2006), PowerPoint is hardly a seductive subject for social research. Yet the fact that such ambivalence about PowerPoint appears to be rife amongst EPIC's communities of practice is this paper's starting point. In feminist geography, Liz Bondi has argued that we should explicitly focus on such sites in order to develop a 'politics of ambivalence' (2004:5). She explains "such a politics is not about 'sitting on a fence', but about creating spaces in which tensions, contradictions and paradoxes can be negotiated fruitfully and dynamically" (p5). In doing EPIC work, whatever our organisational location, many of us have found ourselves in contradictory positions, in relation to our discipline, our politics or our collaborators. PowerPoint is only one site of ambivalence. Yet if we look at the writings of researchers who use other kinds of visual representations in their work, more analytically productive uses of ambivalent alignments are suggested.

Those who study collections of visual artifacts in archives have written about the kinds of identification that a researcher may develop with the image or the process of researching images (Pollock, 1993; Rose, 2000). Immersed in her work using historical photographs, Gillian Rose writes of the way her objects of attention, photographs taken by a wealthy Victorian woman, became pleasurable companions to her thinking and writing. The photographs become a means of introspection, even reverie.

There were three postcards facing the desk in my study. They were stuck in the frame of the window I stared through when I was thinking while writing. I'd look across them, thinking of words. They pictured Lady Hawarden's daughters in elaborate dresses, stilling or standing on bare floors, framing a mirror or next to tall French windows. I had them because they were beautiful and because, with their women placed by mirrors and windows, they reflected to me what I was doing myself also next to a window. They made me want to write beautifully, with clarity and lucidity, my writing next to my window mimicking the beauty inscribed by the light from their windows and mirrors (2000:562)

Rose speaks of the photographs, largely of Lady Hawarden herself and her daughters, as “part of my self...they gave shape to a desire I was struggling to write, a desire not entirely reducible to academic demands, a shape that actively helped me” (ibid:564). Yet as she uncovers photographs of “governesses, a nurse, estate workers” (ibid:568), Rose becomes troubled. She worries “They look as if they are submitting rather than engaging with their employer’s camera” (ibid:568). The relationship between researcher and photograph becomes transformed: “Their effect on me – to mark gendered class difference – disrupted my alignment with the photographs. The postcards are no longer in my study” (ibid:568).

For Rose the shifts in alignment with her objects of investigation – both in her own study and in the Victoria and Albert Museum’s Print Room where she primarily encounters them – lead her to examine the complexities of observation and analysis of this kind of material. She renders problematic the seemingly straightforward and stable relationship between the researcher and the photograph. This is a useful epistemological move, but perhaps more difficult when the visual artifact does not appear to possess the potential for such reverie.

In comparison to a black and white print, with “odd blotches, swirls of chemicals, hairs, fingerprints, over- or under-exposure” (ibid:562) PowerPoint appears to lack any surface traces of authorship with which to engage. The tactility and fragility of handling, part of the process integral to making relationship with old photographic prints, is seemingly absent. It is hardly surprising that social researchers tend to express either anxiety or alienation around the use of PowerPoint. As one cultural geographer, used to presenting slides alongside overheads, alerts us:

the rising hegemony (and I am tempted to say, epistemological monopoly) of Microsoft's PowerPoint reinforces the interchangeability of content within the single (re)presentational system...by and large, what happens is that a hierarchically ordered series of themes appear (even if they fly in from odd angles), no longer on a parallel screen from illustrations but in a sequence on the same screen – the singular, focal point of all attention (Crang, 2003: 239)

In this paper I argue that we need to reconsider the relationship between the researcher and the PowerPoint precisely because of such feelings of ambivalence, anxiety and alienation. I’ve heard such views both in interviews with practitioners and corridor talk,

Social Transitions

voiced not only by EPIC researchers but colleagues in academic settings. Here, PowerPoint may be resisted because it conjures up ‘business presentations’.

My own experience of the increasingly common Microsoft PowerPoint is limited to watching due to lack of technical will and a suspicion of something so associated with corporate life. If it is so good for business presentations, should we not be wary about the packaging of knowledge entailed? (Matless, 2003: 225)

Matless’s comment reveals how PowerPoint has become a symbol of the ‘corporate life’ and potentially a marker of what I consider is, for EPIC practitioners, the troubled (and troubling) opposition of ‘us’ and ‘them’ (Wakeford, 2005). Interviewing colleagues who use PowerPoint in corporate settings over the last 3 months it has become clear that although this software is now an integral part of presentations of ethnographic work, researchers rarely think it is the ideal format for their output. Yet corporations expect all kinds of knowledge generated within the organisation to be transmitted via PowerPoint or similar slide-based software, leaving many such researchers unable to experiment with other presentation formats.

PowerPoint is a normative and normalising part of the typical corporate ethnographer’s work life, but feeling forced to use PowerPoint can lead to researchers feeling frustrated and alienated from what they end up producing. At last year’s EPIC Brinda Dalal and Patricia Wall indicated the problems of deliverables “which take on a life of their own when, for instance, a senior vice president emails our reports to others who are less aware of and less interested in our sub-text” (2005:109). PowerPoint appears to be the opposite of Dalal and Wall’s “inalienable representations”: their graphics toolkit which they use explicitly to keep the analytic grounding of their work visible.

I suggest that part of tackling such alienation is to understand how it operates, and how it might be unsettled. Therefore this paper seeks to examine the ways PowerPoint is used in the EPIC community and offer a few suggestions for how we might develop a less alienated process of presenting work, bearing in mind the limitations of the current software and business infrastructures. My argument builds on Dalal and Wall’s paper in which they emphasized the importance of thinking about the role of representations in corporate ethnography, and also reminded us that arguments about the risks of normative and static representations have been a strong theme amongst researchers involved in Computer Supported Co-operative Work (CSCW) (Dalal & Wall, 2005). My paper also echoes several of last year’s EPIC contributions (e.g. Blomberg, 2005; Cohen, 2005; Plowman, 2005) and draws on the analytic frameworks of Science and Technology Studies (STS). Specifically I will return to the idea of the hybrid that Jeanette Blomberg raised as a useful way to move on from the tendency to treat the social and material as discrete entities that need to be joined together. Reconceptualising PowerPoint as part of the creation of hybrids within EPIC work, rather than as the representation of what has already occurred, offers us opportunities to rethink the range of interventions that are possible within the infrastructures that often seem so constraining.

This paper is a result of both my own immersion in collaborations and grants with corporate ethnographers, and also interviews with colleagues outside academic settings on how social research is used in the development of new technologies. Kris Cohen has outlined the impact of being involved in academic-industry projects for theoretical frameworks about 'the user' (Cohen, 2005). Following on from the work which he described which we carried out at INCITE at the University of Surrey, this paper reports on my initial thinking at the beginning of a three year study funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) which seeks to look at the ways in which social research is 'translated' into design and development (see www.studioincite.com for more details). In this project I will both look back at INCITE's work, as well as trying to develop analytic frameworks beyond the idea of 'translation' of knowledge or the ever dominant idea of 'knowledge transfer'. The aim is to contribute both to communities such as EPIC and also the discipline of Science and Technology Studies via publications, presentations and the more materially innovative (at least for sociology) means of an exhibition.

PowerPoint as Invisible Ethnographic Work

How does PowerPoint function in the day-to-day work of EPIC communities of practice? When used to communicate corporate ethnography, PowerPoint is a complicated visual and material object. Although PowerPoint in corporate ethnography has the possibility of flexibility, it tends to have been normalised into playing a specific role, one that involves what I term 'invisible ethnographic work'.

At academic conferences PowerPoint is expected to correspond to a paper or report of research results. The expectation of a text or further exegesis lies behind the presentation, even if the audience may never see more than the set of slides narrated by the author. Typically, such PowerPoint slides become a representation of a text that does or will exist elsewhere, in a journal or as a report. By contrast evidence from our INCITE collaborations, corroborated by interviews with industry researchers, indicates that in many commercial contexts both within consultancy and research groups, the PowerPoint presentation frequently constitutes (functions as) the final output. It *becomes* the ethnography. It *does* ethnographic work. The PowerPoint presentation both produces the evidence of having done the ethnographic work as well as forming the ethnographic analysis. Furthermore, the set of slides become seen as an object that can be transmitted without being attached to the context of their production.

This state of affairs is so normalised that, despite some general advice on giving good presentations about user experience research (e.g. Kuniavsky, 2005), this crucial role of PowerPoint presentations is completely absent the current published descriptions of the work done by EPIC practitioners. For example two recent articles "An Ethnographic Approach to Design" (Blomberg et al. , 2003) and "Ethnographies in the Front End: Designing for Enhanced Customer Experiences" (Rosenthal & Capper, 2006) present overviews of the use of ethnographic methods and how they can be communicated and

Social Transitions

represented within the design process. Both articles indicate the importance of the visual means of communication. Blomberg et al. offer an overview of techniques that include graphical representations such as experience models, opportunity maps, profiles, scenarios, mock-ups and prototypes. For Rosenthal and Capper the emphasis is the power of visuality. In a section enjoining us to “Capture relevant visual accounts” they say:

The desire is to be able to show the product design team key elements of product use or environment in the field. To some extent this is simply a more robust record than simply telling those who were not in the field what was observed. Designers will be able to work with ethnographic insights more effectively if they able to see what was seen in the field. Furthermore, key decision makers who many resist acting on expressed insight if it conflicts with their own perception may be easier to persuade with the aid of such visual accounts (2006: 235)

Even though Rosenthal and Capper emphasize designers must ‘see what was seen’ and that it may be ‘easier to persuade’ with visual accounts, how such visual accounts are actually constructed, edited or enacted is not explained. In their discussion of profiles, Blomberg et al. recognise the value of multiple modes of engagement:

The value of profiles also is enhanced by making them visible and dynamically present for development teams (e.g. profile posters displayed in project rooms, multimedia representations that are reviewed with the development teams, role-playing scenarios, and walk-throughs based on profiles, etc) ... Such profiles may take many forms, including narrative descriptions, matrices/tables, integrated still images, and video snippets (2003: 977)

Yet presentation software is not mentioned in either article. My collaborations over the last five years suggest that PowerPoint always plays a major part in the way such engagements take place. For example in an INCITE project looking at public internet access, sponsored by Sapient, Kris Cohen worked with designer Delilah Zak to create an experience model (for outline of experience models and their history see Blomberg et al, 2003). Although this was inserted into a printed report, it received greater exposure in a work session with the sponsor’s designers when it was part of a PowerPoint presentation. An interview that I conducted with one of the designers after this session revealed that he did not single out the experience model, but rather commented that the presentation had functioned as a ‘soundtrack’ to his work. The metaphor of a ‘soundtrack’ is very different from that suggested by ‘knowledge transfer’. Yet it is difficult to speak about the functions (both capacities and limitations) of PowerPoint if their role is invisible.

I should emphasize that I am not interested in uncovering the workings of PowerPoint because it holds the key to some better formalized set of methods for doing EPIC work. Alongside Tim Plowman, I think there are plenty of discussions of methods in corporate ethnography (Plowman, 2005). Rather, we need to discuss our methodologies and epistemologies (Wakeford, 2005). At a time when many researchers have to justify why an ethnographic approach adds any business value, or be corralled into the language of ‘return on investment’ (Dalal & Wall, 2005), it seems to me to be vital to talk about all the kinds of work, however obvious and mundane, which constitute EPIC practices. All these practices

are part of the analytic grounding which Francoise Brun-Cottan reminds us should be kept visible (2004). Once we begin talking about this invisible work we can see that PowerPoint is not merely a representation tool, but rather may have particular functions in relation to participation and, more specifically, the ethnographic enterprise itself.

PowerPoint can be thought of as saturated by invisible ethnographic work. The slide set becomes an object that not only constitutes the ethnographic analysis but also acts as a way to enrol (or exclude) others in wider collaborations around the research. In her ethnography of design engineers, Kathryn Henderson talks of design sketches as ‘conscription devices’. As one form of visual object they “not only shape the final products ... but also influence the structure of the work and who may participate in it” (1999:27). Just as sketches become a way to include people and ideas, so do PowerPoint. Of course there are other forms through which communication of ethnographic results takes place. In our collaborations often these have been informal (such as chatting in the corridor, telephone conversations). Nevertheless even in informal communications, PowerPoint is often requested as the real object of value. The set of slides are what are assumed to be transferable, even when they have been constructed primarily for on-screen show to be supplemented by face-to-face interaction. Despite our potential ambivalences, it is this function of PowerPoint – as a conscription device – that means we should spend more time, rather than less, thinking about how we create slides.

From Cognitive Styles to Thick PowerPoint Events

One problem of thinking about a PowerPoint slide set as a unitary object is that it tends to corroborate a view that this discrete set of visuals can be improved with on-screen editing to ensure accurate representations. There is now a burgeoning industry of how to better, more engaging PowerPoint (e.g. Cliff Atkinson’s *Beyond Bullet Points: Using Microsoft PowerPoint to Create Presentations that Inform, Motivate and Inspire*). An early and continual critic is Edward Tufte whose pamphlet “The Cognitive Style of PowerPoint” (2nd ed, 2006) is polemically subtitled “Pitching Out Corrupts Within”. For Tufte, PowerPoint is almost always the wrong way – sometimes, citing NASA disasters, dangerously so – to present complicated information. At the heart of his concern is that evidence should be presented so it can be read accurately, and that on the contrary the hierarchical defaults of the PowerPoint template encourage a cognitive style which is convenient to the presenter but ignores the needs of both the content and the audience. The costs include:

foreshortening of evidence and thought, low spatial resolution, an intensely hierarchical single-path structure as a model for organising every type of content, breaking up narratives and data into slides and minimal fragments, rapid temporal sequencing of thin information rather than focused spatial analysis...[etc] (2006:4)

But Tufte, in his distress about the effects of incorrect presentation of evidence, fails to acknowledge the social nature of PowerPoint slides and hence their flexibility. In his

Social Transitions

discussion PowerPoint slides are thin graphical objects that appear to float free of any sets of social relationships. This is perhaps unsurprising for an author who has always been concerned with statistical graphics. However this perspective reflects a wider trend that treats PowerPoint as a mechanism that holds out the promise of immediate and transparent knowledge transfer. Comments such as, “The more elaborate the hierarchy, the greater the loss of explanatory resolution” (Tufte, 2006, p16) reinforce the view that the information needs only to be structured or presented in a different way – he provides a table of diseases from 1662 (ibid, 25) as exemplary – to achieve a more adequate means of representation. In sum, for Tufte, PowerPoint dilemmas are cognitive problems, to be fixed by better alignment of the slides with our cognitive capacities, which are naturalised and ahistorical.

By contrast, for corporate ethnography researchers, PowerPoint slides appear to be ‘thick’ rather than ‘thin’ phenomena, to borrow some familiar anthropological vocabulary. In the anthropological sense, corporate ethnography PowerPoint become thick because not only are they context-sensitive and locally informed, but they also often require a huge amount of descriptive work. As this description, often ad hoc, is carried out during the presentation, PowerPoint sets are not only singular objects but also thick events.

The contextual and local ‘thickness’ can be illustrated by describing my own experience –my interviews suggest that it is not atypical – of presenting to a small group within a large corporation a set of slides on some initial findings from fieldwork with a set of European new media artists. This presentation occurred in windowless room with a data projector, set on a table around which 12 people were gathered. Others were able to join by telephone conference, each joiner signaled by a beep on the telephone speaker. Unlike presentations at a conventional conference, or perhaps in a university department, audience members interrupted freely as I progressed through my slides, meaning I twice flicked back and forth through my slides to try to respond to a question which could be addressed by a slide further forward in my set, or by referring back to an earlier slide. Several of the audience had brought laptops and typed into them during my presentation. They were able to connect to the internet from the room. The audience came and went freely, both from the room and the telephone conferencing system (their departure signaled by two beeps).

Although for Tufte the PowerPoint slide set is the focus of attention, I was constantly aware that the presentation was actually much more about generating and sustaining engagement and engrossment (terms associated with Goffman’s analysis of interaction) by drawing on the mutability of the PowerPoint as an object which was performed rather than just transmitted. Blomberg points out that the Project Rooms used by E-Lab and then Sapient were flexible arrangements of material goods, human labor and social relations (2003:69). In the same way my PowerPoint presentation became a flexible arrangement of these same factors. The material goods included my laptop - which went to sleep twice during questions, provoking me to pay attention to it and break off my train of thought – as well as the laptops of the audience, one of which was used to Google the website of an institution which I was describing during the talk. The material aspect of the PowerPoint also included European magazines aimed at the group of users I had been

A Reflective Analysis of Ethnography

interviewing, as well as other visual printed material that was passed around while I was talking. The human labor did not just include my work, but incorporated a lively dialogue throughout my talk from audience members who came from social science, humanities and engineering. When I subsequently checked my email I realised by looking at the time on the message that one of those with the laptop open during my talk had emailed me during the event suggesting that I interview her about the topic under discussion. The fact that audience members in this technology setting frequently email and instant message during presentation was highlighted when as I was leaving the room another individual approached me and said “Don’t worry, I was making notes on your talk. I wasn’t doing my email!”. Her desire to reassure me about her attention emerged in the context of the relationships generated through long-term collaborations with several of the audience, but also reveals normative behaviour.

Another factor had a large impact on my experience in this instance. For this presentation I had been asked to prepare a set of slides that could be circulated in advance for those not able to make the meeting. Some of these individuals had become part of the meeting by phone conference call, although others could download the slides without being part of the gathering. This requirement required me to create two PowerPoint sets, as the subjects of some of my photos had asked that their pictures not be circulated electronically, although they had given permission for them to be included in a presentation. Therefore the audience in the same room as myself could see the photos, but I also had to describe the missing photos to those who were on the telephone link, thus drawing attention to this other form of participation.

These factors are a reminder that in the actual day to day use of PowerPoint to report research results involves much more than the layout of each slide. Such events are profoundly social and often involve bodily gestures and heightened attention to physical elements of the performance. One of my industry colleagues told me that when talking about fieldwork she was expected to ‘channel the user’. I’ve highlighted above some factors of the interactional context of my presentation, including potentially competing elements. Nonetheless I do not want to suggest that this context can be completely separated from the slide content. In interviewing corporate researchers about their experiences of PowerPoint, many spoke of the ways in which it was the nature of the ethnographic content itself that led them to devise specialized strategies for using PowerPoint. This points to the specificity of the ways in which PowerPoint has become normalised within corporate ethnography. In formatting terms this tends to be a combination of photographs taken during fieldwork, and text captions or bullet points relating to these photos. Many such slides were shown at last year’s EPIC conference. However in contrast to Rosenthal and Capper’s suggestion that it is the visual accounts which persuade non-fieldworkers of the veracity of the research, in the day to day practice of corporate ethnography the power of the visual is enacted via generating narratives of ‘being there’ which have many precedents in anthropology. In other words, PowerPoint can only function as ethnographic because of the ways in which the corporate ethnographer puts themselves in between the slide (e.g. photo + text) and the audience and in this way makes the PowerPoint slides into evidence.

Social Transitions

There is now a longstanding concern within anthropology about how the actuality of the ethnographic endeavour is rendered via writing. Clifford Geertz points out that this has nothing to do with theoretical framing. Rather it is about persuading the reader that something has happened “offstage”. He states:

The ability of anthropologists to get us to take what they say seriously has less to do with either a factual look or an air of conceptual elegance than it has with their capacity to convince us that what they say is a result of their having actually penetrated (or if you prefer, having been penetrated by) another form of life, of having one way or another, truly “been there”. And that, persuading us that this offstage miracle has occurred, is where the writing comes in. (Geertz, 1988: 4)

Accordingly the use of PowerPoint becomes another way means by which the ethnographic miracle can be shown to have happened. Corporate ethnography demonstrates that this does not depend on writing. Rather this occurs in the whole PowerPoint event that typically incorporates fieldwork anecdotes that go beyond what is seen on the data projector. There are well known writing styles and agendas in ethnographic monographs a sample of which Geertz characterises as “Malinowskian experience-seeking, Levi-Straussian rage for order, Benedictine cultural irony, or Evans-Pritchardish cultural reassurance” (p143). My suspicion is that already there is a huge variety of ways in which Geertz’s “rendering of the actual” takes place in corporate ethnography, but that they all share this characteristic - often implicitly - of dealing with the relationship between author and content. This is perhaps why there is very little use of stock photography.

Although PowerPoint slide sets in corporate ethnography are rarely comprised only of photos (a noticeable exception being slide sets devised by two of my interviewees which were intended to be shocking precisely because they had no text attached and therefore heightened the necessity for interpretation), I think the history of photography provides useful parallels in considering how PowerPoint events become used as evidence. John Tagg reminds us that “The notion of evidentiality, on which instrumental photographs depended was not already and unproblematically in place; it had to be produced and institutionally sanctioned.” (1991:55). Historically, the expectation of photography as universal and a suitable means for neutral seeing, and therefore as a tool for science, was not an inevitable development. It was the product of discursive struggle.

In corporate ethnography this struggle is still underway. There are instances where attempts are being made to resist PowerPoint or unsettle its normalising force. One of the industry researchers to whom I spoke had several strategies to avoid the re-use of her photos in what she disparagingly called ‘random PowerPoint’ generated by others. This is a common problem reported by commercial fieldworkers. One of her strategies was to try to generate a set of photos that she thought would be difficult to interpret without explanations, rather than to circulate a PowerPoint set of results. Although such tactics may succeed in subverting individual demands, I suggest that a more effective way of continuing to keep a discursive struggle ongoing is to recognise and use a framework generated in STS that

examines the ways in which hybrids are created and dissembled. If thick PowerPoint events can themselves be seen as a process of mingling different kinds of actors and properties, perhaps these properties could be highlighted rather than obscured in our use of PowerPoint itself.

PowerPoint and Hybridity

Drawing on the writings of Latour and Haraway, Mike Michael has examined the notion of hybridity in terms of the generation of fieldwork data, with particular attention to the processes by which sociological data is produced in a qualitative interview (Michael, 2004). He recognises the hybrid as a way to theorize the intermingling of human and non-humans, and in common with other STS scholars is keen to point out the contemporary proliferation of hybrids that cross the nature-society divide such as frozen embryos or gene synthesizers (2004: 9). Although debunking of the nature-society dualism via the identification of hybrids seems far removed from the discussion of PowerPoint, Michael claims that hybrids can be recognised in numerous kinds of interactions and relationships, even in mundane fieldwork encounters. He is interested in both identifying and constructing heterogeneous entities that will function as ways to think about everyday routines. To do this he has developed the idea of the 'co(a)gent' (2000), an analytic formulation which enables us to see the complex heterogeneous interactions that make up social ordering processes. He explains:

Co(a)gents thus serve as heuristic probes with which to examine and explicate relations, connections and interactions that are barely apparent but nevertheless serve in the (de)structuring of everyday routines. In this respect the value of particular co(a)gents rests not so much on their empirical 'accuracy' as on their capacity to illuminate otherwise hidden processes (2004:10)

Michael intends that the terms co(a)gent and co(a)gency signal both the cogency of a hybrid, which he describes as "its convincing power and its unitariness", and also show that agency is distributed. In other words hybrids involve co-agents. The methodological imperative is to 'follow the co(a)gent' and at the same time recognise it is an analytic fabrication. As an example Michael suggests the 'couch potato' a co(a)gent through which "it is possible to interconnect...literatures on governmentality, consumption, body, technology, design, emotions, gender, globalization" (2004:10).

Michael's recent work focuses on the social production of social data. He relates the experience of a 'disastrous interview episode' in order to show the way disruption to smooth social routines which are assumed to take place during interviewing highlights the normally obscured nonhuman elements. His claim is that in order to make the production of social data possible nonhumans are 'disciplined' even though they are contributors to this production all along. The interview in question was conducted as part of a research project on people's understanding of radiation. As the interview began, the respondent's dog sat on the interviewer's feet. Soon it was difficult to divert the interviewee from talking about her new job at a fast food restaurant, and a cat appeared who was intent on playing with the tape

Social Transitions

recorder. In a passage that is painfully familiar to anyone who has done extensive interviewing of this kind, Michael recalls:

As the cat played with the recorder, it got further and further away from the interview, which was rapidly turning into a monologue about Burger King a monologue which I could neither halt nor redirect, being too distracted by the disappearing tape recorder and the pit bull's liking for my feet. (13).

The level of interruptions of nonhumans in this case seems extremely high. Yet Michael points out that in order to be seen to be gatherable, these relations – for example his relationship with the tape recorder, or the cat dragging it away – must be screened out. It is this screening out which makes the data ‘social’. He suggests we should think rather about the processes that led us to think that the tape recorder or the interviewer is a singular entity in the first place. The hybrid version might be the ‘intercorder’, a hybrid of the interviewer and tape recorder.

If the ‘intercorder’ hybrid is a useful heuristic probe for the interview situation, it is possible to see that the PowerPoint event, incorporating the speaker, the slides, the audience and the (technological and other) infrastructures, might also be seen to include hybrids that might be useful heuristic devices. From my example the most obvious of these would be the co(a)gent of the presenter plus the projected PowerPoint slides plus the presenter’s laptop. Another might be the downloaded PowerPoint slides, the conference telephone speaker and the remote listener dialing in. I’ve not been able to arrive at any single word to sum up these hybrids, with all my imagined possibilities sounding faintly ridiculous (Powerlapresent, etc.) The point, as Michael insists, is that we can generate numerous possibilities of hybrids. Yet some hybrids more than others will help to illuminate potentially obscure social ordering and also enable novel connections between discourses. Identifying hybrids when dealing with interactions around social research means that we might begin to think that the researcher speaks ‘with’, ‘through’ or ‘as’ the identified co-agents. In so doing the status of data becomes more relational (2004:20). This seems to fit with accounts of how PowerPoint events unfold in practice, although it does not in itself point to means by which we can resist their normalising tendencies.

Conclusion: The Crafting of Social Data

Gillian Rose’s commentary on the photos taken by Lady Harwarden revealed the transformation of her objects of study from postcards in which she found inspiration to pictures which were fundamentally troubling in terms of what they suggested about the dynamics of their production. Could we think about shifts in our own orientation to PowerPoint? I’ve suggested that PowerPoint slides are not merely visual objects, but rather should be seen as part of thick PowerPoint events, which themselves could be seen as hybrid entities. Nevertheless I think it would be naïve to propose that such reframing would fundamentally change our ambivalence about PowerPoint as a tool for corporate

ethnography. Rather, what I would like to put forward is the suggestion that we explicitly work within our ambivalent relationship to presentation software and use thick PowerPoint events to create hybrids that keep in focus the relationship between the researcher and the slides. Following Michael's claims about how information that enables data to be seen as social is screened out, these thick PowerPoint events might be explicitly worked on to leave in some of the messiness of the social. PowerPoint could involve the crafting of social data, a crafting that might leave traces of its own (our own) work.

How might this be done? Here are some tentative thoughts. Given the predominance of photos from fieldwork in corporate ethnography (see Anderson & Nafus, this volume), my first suggestion would be to think about transforming this photographic practice so that as fieldworkers we are present with our participants in our photos, and that these photos perhaps highlight something of the (multitude of dynamics) between researcher and participant. Do photos always need to be taken by us? Could they explicitly be discussed as representations of the participants during our encounters with them? Would these discussions themselves need in some way to be recorded or represented? Second, in order to put into question the standard use of digital photography and digital video, we could explore the use of other, older, materials and media production. Jay Hasbrook (2000) used both 16mm and Super8 film in his study of a rural gay community, a choice influenced by the desire to bring to the fore the issues of time and memory which he was discussing with his participants. Compared to the clean look of digital video, earlier film formats such as 16mm and Super8 often show scratches and tramlines. Even though video can appear to have been deteriorated through technical effects, these films appear rougher, their grainy texture is in stark contrast to the sleekness of video. Could such properties of these media be used to create different kind of hybrids? Might they be integrated into our thick PowerPoint events? Would there be risks in romanticizing the effects of filming certain participants in older formats? – after all, Margaret Mead used 16mm film as well as still photography in Bali. Third, and beyond a transformation of our image-led practices, perhaps we could begin to consider how text and writing within the thick PowerPoint event might be transformed. This is not a call for written reports or journal papers to necessarily part of the hybrid (although these forms do have their own advantages). Rather my suggestion is that we create texts that highlight questions about evidentiality, and therefore counter the idea of the unambiguous and straightforward truth of the bullet point or heading. The rise of blogs as a form of writing has enormous public visibility at the moment. Might blogs be used either alongside our PowerPoint or somehow embedded within them? Are there other forms of narrative or storytelling that highlight the problematics at the heart of the ethnographic enterprise? (EPIC 2006 included Dori Tunstall's performance of a highly non-normative text, accompanied by soundtrack and video). Additionally we might think about foregrounding our own participation in the formation of PowerPoint, using techniques such as handwriting scanned into slides.

Although the bulk of this paper has examined the use of PowerPoint with reference to the theoretical literature, I have concluded with these suggestions that might be explored by EPIC interlocutors in a practical manner. In so doing I recognize that the

Social Transitions

opportunities for keeping thick PowerPoint events as open, possible venues for such exploration may be extremely limited and sometimes impossible, particular in contractor/consultancy work where client templates may be forced upon the researcher. However I hope some EPIC practitioners will take up the challenge of creating new co(a)gents for PowerPoint, both as heuristic probes, and also as ways in which we can think more rather than less about our invisible work.

Notes

Thanks to the EPIC committee and in particular session curator Rachel Jones for invaluable remarks on the drafts of this paper.

References

- Blomberg, J.
2005 *The Coming of Age of Hybrids: Notes on Ethnographic Praxis*. In Proceedings of EPIC 2005. Washington, DC: American Anthropological Association. 67-74.
- Blomberg, J., Burrell, M. & Guest, G.
2003 *An Ethnographic Approach to Design*. in Jacko, J. & Sears, A. (eds.) The Human-Computer Interaction Handbook: Fundamentals, Evolving Technologies and Emerging Applications. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates
- Bondi, L.
2004 *For a Feminist Geography of Ambivalence*. Gender, Place and Culture. 11: 3-15
- Brun-Cotton, F.
2004 *The Anthropologist as Ontological Choreographer*. Paper presented at the Society for Applied Anthropology Conference, Santa Fe, April 2005.
- Cohen, K
2005 *Who We Talk About When We Talk About Users* in Proceedings of EPIC 2005. American Anthropological Association. 9-31
- Crang, M.
2003 *The Hair in the Gate: Visuality and Geographical Knowledge* Antipode 35 (2) 238-243
- Dalal, B. & Wall, P.
2005 *The Baker's Dozen: the Presence of the Gift in Service Encounters*. in Proceedings of EPIC 2005. American Anthropological Association. 100-114.

Geertz, C.

- 2000 *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author*. Stanford: Stanford University Press
- Hasbrook, J.
2000 *Utopian Imaginaries and Faerie Practice: A Mapping of Relational Agency*. MA Thesis,
Department of Anthropology, University of Southern California
- Henderson, K.
1999 *OnLine and On Paper: Visual Representations, Visual Culture and Computer Graphics in
Design Engineering* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Kuniavsky, M
2003 *Observing the User Experience: A Practitioner's Guide to User Research*. London: Elsevier
- Matless, D
2003 *Gestures Around the Visual*. Antipode 35 (2) 222-226.
- Michael, M
2000 *Reconnecting Culture, Technology and Nature: From Society to Heterogeneity*. London:
Routledge.
- Michael, M.
2004 *On making data social: heterogeneity in sociological practice*. Qualitative Research 4 (1): 5-23.
- Plowman, T.
2005 *Ethnography, Operations and Objectual Practice*. In Proceedings of EPIC 2005.
Washington, DC: American Anthropological Association. 53-66
- Pollock, G.
1993 *The dangers of proximity: the spaces of sexuality and surveillance in word and image*. Discourse
16: 1-32.
- Rose, G.
2000 *Practising protography: an archive, a study, some photographs and a researcher*. Journal of
Historical Geography, 26, 4: 555-571.
- Rose, G.
2004 *On the Importance of Asking the Right Questions, or What is the Power of PowerPoint, exactly?*
Antipode 36 (5) 795-797.
- Rosenthal, S. R, & Capper, M.
2006 *Enthnographies at the Front End: Designing for Enchanced Customer Experiences*. Journal of
Product Innovation Management. 23: 215-237.
- Star, S. L. & Strauss, A.

Social Transitions

- 1999 *Layers of Silence, Arenas of Voice: the Ecology of Visible and Invisible Work*. Computer Supported Cooperative Work 8: 9-30.
- Suchman, L.
1995 *Making Work Visible* Communications of the ACM. 38 (9): 56-64
- Tagg, J
1991 *Globalization, Totalization and the Discursive Field*, in A. King (ed.) Culture, Globalization and the World System. London: Macmillan.
- Tufte, Edward
2006 *The Cognitive Style of PowerPoint: Pitching Out Corrupts Within*. Cheshire: Graphics Press LLC
- Wakeford, N.
2005 *Craft, Value and the Fetishism of Method*. In Proceedings of EPIC 2005. Washington, DC: American Anthropological Association. 73-80
- Yates, J. & Orlikowski, W.
forthcoming *The PowerPoint Presentation and Its Corollaries: How Genres Shape Communicative Action in Organizations*. in Zachry, M. & Thralls, C. (eds.) The Cultural Turn: Communication Practices in Workplaces and the Professions. Amityville, nY: Baywood Publishing.

Web resources

Further details of the larger project “Beyond Translation”, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, are available at www.studioincite.com.