On the rewards and perils of “studying up:”
Practical strategies for qualitative research on media organizations

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ABSTRACT

Although mass media corporations exhibit an increasingly strong hold over media content, the individuals who work for these corporations are rarely, if ever, the subjects of empirical social scientific inquiry. The reason for this is largely pragmatic: gaining access to professionals working in media organizations is extraordinarily difficult for outside scholars. Although there have been a number of important scholarly inquiries into news and entertainment production throughout the history of communication as a field, the difficulties in gathering data from individuals in media organizations has severely limited the frequency of such research.

Despite the challenges, studying the decision-making processes of elites in media organizations is key to a critical assessment of the processes by which media content is created, distributed, and evaluated. To achieve this goal, this essay outlines strategies for studying media organizations using qualitative research methods. Based upon my own experiences in conducting a number of interview-based research studies of professionals in the broadcast and cable television industries, the paper examines the benefits and pitfalls of a number of strategies for gathering data about the decision-making and everyday practices of media elites.

The paper focuses most in-depth on the qualitative interview of media elites as a viable method of data collection. First, sources of background research and interview question-writing are considered. Second, techniques of sampling and strategies for getting beyond the “firewall” of media gatekeepers are explored and evaluated. Finally, while the scholar/interviewer holds little power in such interactions with media elites, the paper will discuss some strategies for eliciting valuable data from the interview subject without alienating the subject. What can scholars hope or expect to gain from these potentially risky forays into media organizations? I argue that, despite the risks, “studying up” provides a vital perspective to the critical study of media institutions in society.
The sociological and critical study of mass media producers is by no means new. There is a rich history of scholarship and inquiry into the actions and decisions of individuals in mass media organizations in the field of media and communication research (e.g., Breed, 1960; Cantor, 1971; Faulkner, 1976; Gans, 1979; Gerbner, 1969; Gitlin, 1985; Pekurny, 1982; Powdermaker, 1950; Tuchman, 1978; Turow, 1997, 1982; Wasko, 2003; White, 1950). However, the story of media production analysis is a disjointed one. Unlike other areas of communication research where theories and methodological tools have developed in concert with one another, the topical study of mass media producers has developed almost completely isolated from scholarly inquiry into the method of organizational research. Both critical mass media research and organizational communication research can guide scholars wishing to conduct media production analysis, yet each has developed in almost separate scholarly universes. This is unfortunate, to say the least, since much of the methodological debate and innovation surrounding the qualitative study of organizations has taken place within the context of organizational communication research.

Why has the connection between media production analysis and organizational communication research remained obscure? The near absence of healthy methodological debate and reflection among scholars involved in research on media producers is likely due to the fact that these types of studies are relatively sparse within the literature, negating any reason for reflecting at length on the methodological and epistemological foundations of this research. The reason for this paucity of studies is largely pragmatic: gaining access to executives working in media organizations is extraordinarily difficult for outside scholars. As Hertz and Imber (1993) have noted, “Few social researchers study elites because elites are by their very nature difficult to
penetrate. Elites establish barriers that set their members apart from the rest of society” (p. 3).

In fact, if business elites in general are difficult to place under a research microscope, elites working for mass media organizations are even more challenging to investigate. Since they are involved on a daily basis with in the creation or distribution of media materials to millions, more than other business elites, these individuals are only too aware of the potential consequences of negative publicity. Because of their power to influence these millions, however, it is even more crucial that scholars investigate the assumptions, practices, and beliefs of individuals involved in media production and distribution.

Often, the challenges facing critical media production scholars are formidable. Even if the researcher is able to negotiate access to a research site, what if the researcher has little to offer the organization in terms of his/her research or findings? What if the researcher is attempting to use a critical or political economic paradigm to understand the organizational processes involved? Or, worse still, what if the researcher is attempting to use critical scholarship to understand the company from which he/she is requesting information? All of these approaches place the researcher in the potentially hazardous position of an outsider, and work against the interests of the researcher. How can one, then, conduct research on media organizations without compromising the very essence or epistemological standpoint of their research in the process of gathering the data itself? Given these concerns, access to data about media production behaviors is largely unpredictable, artificially depressing its appeal among scholars attempting to establish a productive research career.

Another potential reason why studies of media organizations are conducted so rarely is that scholars may feel they must “re-invent the wheel” each and every time they undertake this type of research. To be sure, there are particularities to each research endeavor, but there are
also many similarities in method from one study to the next which can guide scholars toward the
collection of rich and revealing data about media organizational practices. The “re-invent the
wheel” problem is also an outgrowth of the general lack of methodological detail about some of
the classic studies of media production. Despite some of the rich data reported in some of these
studies, the process by which these researchers obtain their data is often murky at best.

To overcome some of these difficulties and to assist scholars wishing to concentrate their
research efforts on mass media organizations, this essay offers some preliminary methodological
guidance. Below I outline practical strategies for scholars who wish to gather qualitative data
about the activities of media organizations. These methodological strategies are informed both
by existing literature about qualitative organizational research and by my own experiences in
conducting this type of research. Because many of the reflections and examples are based upon
my own personal experiences in conducting this type of research, I will discuss some of these
examples in the first person for the sake of clarity and accuracy.

Before beginning, a word of clarification on the boundaries of this essay. First, I will
place the focus here on U.S. media organizations, though this is not to suggest that studies of
international media corporations are not vital or necessary. Second, this essay exclusively
considers critical or political economic approaches to the study of mass media organizations.
Although there are other theoretical modes for the study of media organizations, my previous
research has focused primarily on issues of information and power in U.S. media corporations,
and investigations from this political economic perspective are relatively scarce (but much
needed) in the existing literature on media production. Finally, this essay is not intended to be
proscriptive in any way. In other words, I do not propose here a textbook model for conducting
qualitative interviews of media business elites. Rather, in the discussion of some of my own
successes and failures in interviewing elites, I aim to explore the epistemological and methodological considerations surrounding elite interviewing in media organizations.

*Theorizing Media Production Analysis as Critical Scholarship*

The focus of media production analysis is to examine the decisions, actions, and reflexive behaviors of mass media producers, distributors, and exhibitors. Although the method of study incorporates information gleaned from various individuals working within a media organization, the goal is to build a coherent picture of the organization itself. An organization can be understood as “an activity system that is goal-directed and boundary-maintaining,” (Turow, 1984:8), a definition which comes from Aldrich (1979). Media production scholars focus almost exclusively on mass communicators, which are responsible for the “industrialized production, reproduction, and multiple distribution of messages through technological devices” (Turow, 1992:12). What is the goal or ultimate purpose of media production research? Critical research of mass media organizations should strive to explore and map the use of power in the creation and distribution of messages. George Gerbner (1969: 242) said it well when he noted that, as scholars, “we are concerned with the systematic exercise of power that reside in institutional roles or relationships to centers of power. These roles and relationships for the network and flow of powers that define the scope of the mass communicator’s tasks (his ‘freedom’), guide his attention, and limit his choices.” The investigation of issues of power within media organizations is the cornerstone of a political economic view of communication institutions. Since the analysis of power is made more difficult given the privileges often afforded elites in these positions (including control of information), more forethought into the methods of obtaining useful data from these elites is warranted. This essay is an attempt to de-mystify the
process of gathering useful data about media elites and to provide guideposts for scholars wishing to study media organizations from this critical vantage point.

Conducting Interviews with Media Professionals

As noted above, qualitative interviews have been successfully utilized in previous research on mass media organizations. We must turn to the literature of organizational sociology and organizational communication, however, to find discussions regarding data gathering and analysis techniques (see Bryman, 1988; Buchanan, Boddy, & McCalman, 1988; Gamson, 1995; Hertz & Imber, 1995, 1993; King, 1994; Ostrander, 1993; Rubin & Rubin, 2004; Taylor & Trujillo, 2001; Thomas, 1993). As this literature explores, there are a number of steps that scholars should take when interviewing professionals in mass media organizations. Below I describe six critical methodological issues that face researchers scholars studying mass media professionals. First, background research is essential to good interviewing. Second, there are a number of strategies for writing the type of qualitative interview questions that are likely to yield interesting and relevant data. Third, some effort should be made to consider issues of sampling when interviewing elites in one or multiple mass media organizations. Fourth, negotiating access to elite settings is a challenging endeavor, and some strategies to facilitate entry into media organizations are considered. Fifth, I outline general protocols and other strategies for conducting interviews with media elites. Finally, power inequities between researcher and the elite research subject are considered.
1. Conducting Background Research

Before conducting qualitative interviews with media professionals, there is nothing that can take the place of strong background research. There are a number of reasons why background research on the media organization is essential. First, the time and patience of elite respondents is extremely limited and precious, so it is advisable not to waste time on questions that can be answered simply by looking in available print or reference sources about the company in question. Not only does proper background research save time in the interview situation, it also demonstrates to the elite respondent that you care enough about the organization and the respondent’s time to do some background searching on your own. Third, research can help you construct interesting and valid questions for the interviewee and can also alert you to recent events that may require explanation by your elite respondent. Finally, evidence that you have done extensive background research on the organization can be a powerful tool for negotiating the power relationship with the interviewee.

Although scholars are typically looking for the type of information that can only come from insiders working for media organizations, there is a vast array of public information resources that can help scholars prepare for informative one-on-one interviews with media professionals. If you are doing research on a mass media corporation, understanding the structural dynamics of that company’s industry can be a valuable asset when writing questions and identifying key issues. Understanding media ownership relationships is one type of public information that can help scholars understand power dynamics in an industry. Some good sources for this kind of information include Compaine’s (2000) *Who owns the media?* and the Columbia Journalism Review’s online webpage entitled “Who owns what?” (http://www.cjr.org/tools/owners/).
There are multiple print and online reference sources that can also provide background information about media industries (see Table 1 below). Sources such as *Business Rankings Annual* and *Broadcasting and Cable Yearbook* can provide industry statistics and trends. Although they are much less available and are quite expensive (running into the thousands of dollars), annual data published by media industry market research firms such as Veronis, Suhler, and Associates, Audits & Surveys Worldwide, Roper Starch Worldwide, and Paul Kagan Associates can also provide an updated picture of a media industry. Finally, the online websites of industry trade associations can provide a wealth of industry-wide data (such as circulation and audience viewership data) which is updated on a regular basis.

Along with industry-wide data, researchers preparing to conducting qualitative interviews with media elites should have a keen awareness of the individual company’s structure, business model, and recent market activities. One excellent reference source (available both online and in print form) is *Hoover’s Handbook of Private Companies* (2003), which provides a wealth of information by company, including ownership data, a list of competitors, subsidiaries, and annual revenue data, among other things. For more information on individual companies, a keyword search of the relevant industry trade press (for examples, see Table 1 below) can yield substantive and more up-to-date information than reference sources. It is also useful to search for general press articles (found in newspapers and journalism magazines) written about the company in question. The LEXIS-NEXIS online database is just one searching tool that can help locate this information. Finally, there is a wealth of information available on the Internet about media companies which is provided by their own company websites. Often, media companies have two separate websites: one for consumers or viewers, and another for advertisers or

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1 For an excellent overview of communication research sources, see Rubin, Rubin & Peele (2005).
investors. While the latter may take more time to locate (creative use of search engines such as Google and Yahoo can help a great deal), it is generally worthwhile because of the greater likelihood for substantive information that could be of value to outside scholars.

### Table 1. Selected Media Industry Background Sources

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reference Sources</th>
<th>Trade Press Sources</th>
<th>Market Research Sources</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Business Rankings Annual</td>
<td>Advertising Age</td>
<td>Audits &amp; Surveys Worldwide</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broadcasting &amp; Cable Yearbook</td>
<td>Billboard</td>
<td>Paul Kagan Associates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hoover’s Handbook of Private Companies</td>
<td>Broadcasting &amp; Cable</td>
<td>Roper Starch Worldwide</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industry &amp; Trade Outlook</td>
<td>Editor &amp; Publisher</td>
<td>Veronis, Suhler, &amp; Associates</td>
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<tr>
<td>(published by U.S. Dept. of Commerce)</td>
<td>Electronic Media</td>
<td>Young &amp; Rubicam</td>
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<tr>
<td>Market Share Reporter</td>
<td>Folio: The Magazine for</td>
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<tr>
<td>Leading 100</td>
<td>Hollywood Reporter</td>
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<td>Publisher’s Weekly</td>
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<td>Quill</td>
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<td>Variety</td>
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<td>Writer’s Digest</td>
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2. **Writing Good Interview Questions**

Before contacting media professionals for interviews, it is advisable to generate a comprehensive list of questions to guide the interview. Unlike quantitative survey research, which guides responses into pre-determined criteria, qualitative questions should be designed to open up possibilities for roaming reflection on the part of the respondent. Since each research project will have a unique set of issues to explore, my comments here are designed simply to provide general guidance in the area of question-creation.

The first step is to clearly define who is going to be interviewed. For example, are you interviewing the individual, or the position, or the company as a whole? It is important to realize that the respondent is playing multiple roles within the organization and with you during the
Thomas (1993:92) explains this concept as an understanding of the “personae” in interviews, which should be a critical feature of question design:

To avoid caricature, [the researcher] must cultivate an awareness of multiple personae that make up the reality of important people in big companies. To provide insight, as well as build a firm foundation for sociological analysis, [the researcher] must separate out the person from the role and the role from the formal context within which it is acted out. (p. 92)

If, for example, your research questions are targeted toward an understanding of specific functions of an organization, then individuals interviewed will act as mouthpieces for those roles in the interview. However, if the goal of the investigation is to analyze the interactions between specific individuals in a work setting, then the respondent’s value to the interviewer is revealed in their own personal views and opinions, rather than their position in the organization. These personae are not mutually exclusive, either, but intersect with one another during the course of an interview. It is the researcher’s task to sort through these personae and locate the information of most value to the research questions.

When researchers engage ask questions of media elites, they are attempting to bridge two different worlds of understanding – the academic and the professional. The language of sociology is not the everyday language of conversation, nor is it the specialized language of a particular professional field of specialization. Indeed, media professionals will often utilize their own special jargon which can be confusing for outsiders.\(^2\) The key to bridging this gap is to frame questions for media professionals in terms of a narrative that the respondent can relate to in the interview. One useful style of questioning is to broadly frame an issue or problem and let the interviewee fill in the blanks. For instance, you might start a question by asking: “Can you tell me about an instance in which a stated company policy failed for one reason or another?”

\(^2\) The trade magazine *Variety* is infamous for using its own brand of industry jargon and shorthand.
This is an open question which allows the interviewee a great deal of latitude in answering, but it also can provide the fodder for more substantive and specific follow-up questions. Additionally, if multiple respondents in the same organization are asked the same broad question and there is similarity in the responses (in other words, numerous interviewees talk about the same policy failure and its implications), then this is evidence of an overall pattern that is useful to explore in the analysis. The other advantage of this type of general questioning is that it is potentially less threatening to the respondent, who will be less likely to attempt to “figure out” what the researcher is interested in “proving” in the research.

The second question-writing strategy is designed to help overcome the “general vs. specific” problem. Interview respondents are much more likely to see their work activities and life as a series of discrete events and activities. Social researchers, on the other hand, are more likely to see events as connected to larger structural realities about which respondents may be less consciously aware. In the process of structuring interview questions, don’t ask or expect your subject to be overly theoretical in their reflections about their own practices and statements. This is the job of the researcher, and it represents a kind of methodological laziness to place the burden of arriving at these conclusions onto the respondent. Instead, it is often useful to use the background research you’ve done about an organization to identify key events or decisions which can be the subject of specific questions. These questions generally work well as probe or follow-up questions after a more general question is asked. Placing the context of the discussion squarely on specific events and activities is a strategy for concentrating the respondent on concrete organizational behaviors, which can then be interpreted in the analysis. In the question sheet itself, I also find it useful to have a blank in the left margin next to each interview and
probe question on the list such that I check off each question I would ask as I move through the interview.

3. Sampling (Within and Between Media Organizations)

How can scholars locate organizations and elite research subjects for study in a critical media production analysis? This is clearly one of the most difficult aspects of starting any research project, and the difficulties in media production research are even more pronounced than in other types of research. Unlike other subjects generally studied in social scientific research, there are few enticements which can be offered to elite respondents to encourage their participation in research. Additionally, there is typically little that an outside scholar can offer media organizations in exchange for their participation. Despite these challenges, scholars should give some forethought to sampling issues before jumping into a new research study of media elites.

Regardless of whether or not you are examining one media organization or a number of different organizations, the first question is often this: Should you be *systematic* in your sampling? Given the extreme difficulty in getting access to elites in their organizational settings, most researchers can’t afford to be terribly systematic about sampling elites. Outside researchers generally have to take what they can get, and should be opportunistic about getting access to media companies and their employees. As Buchanan, Boddy, and McCalman (1988) wisely observed:

*Fieldwork is permeated with the conflict between what is theoretically desirable on the one hand and what is practically possible on the other. It is desirable to ensure representativeness in the sample, uniformity of interview procedures, adequate data collection across the range of topics to be explored, and so on. But the members of organizations block access to information, constrain the time allowed for interviews, lose your questionnaires, go on holiday, and join other organizations in the middle of your*
In the conflict between the desirable and the possible, the possible always wins” (pp. 53-54).

Given these challenges, the most common type of sampling found in media production analyses is *convenience sampling*. Sometimes a researcher knows insiders in a media organization or perhaps has even worked previously for that organization. This facilitates a quick process of connecting with an informant and generating data and links to other respondents within the organization. In many classic studies of media production, particularly those focusing on print and electronic news production (see, for example, Gitlin, 1985; Powdermaker, 1950; and White, 1950), the choice of which organization to study has been largely determined by the access obtained via a key informant or contact in the organization.

Another sampling strategy that I have used with substantial success is *snowball sampling*. In other words, once I have made a successful contact with one media professional, I attempt to obtain at least one more potential interviewee name from that respondent, thereby building a database of potential respondents. The contact with each new respondent is made easier since you can always reference another business acquaintance or personal friend who referred you to the person. A word of caution on this technique: It is often painstaking and can require significant amounts of time to generate a good-sized pool of respondents. However, given the difficulties in gaining access to media elites, this can be a powerful strategy for generating a list of potential respondents or contacts who may not immediately decline your request for an interview. The resulting sample of media professionals is certainly not random and may reflect a smaller circle of respondents, but this sampling disadvantage is more than outweighed by the potential for getting access to media elites and obtaining substantive interview data.

Aside from convenience sampling, the most common type of method used in organizational communication research is the *case study*. This occurs when the researcher goes
into considerable depth and detail on a single organization by interviewing multiple respondents within that organization. This type of sampling is much more common in qualitative organizational research because it is more efficient and issues of access are made much simpler because senior decision-makers within the organization generally give consent for the researcher to conduct interviews. What this sampling technique gains in the degree of detail generated on a single organization, it generally also lacks in the representativeness across media organizations, hampering the ability to do comparative analysis within a single study.

Despite the merits of convenience sampling, snowball sampling, and case studies for media organizational research, it is not absolutely impossible to achieve some degree of systematicity in sampling across organizations. For example, in a previous study of local television broadcasters’ compliance with children’s television regulations (Sullivan & Jordan, 1999), my co-author and I utilized a type of stratified cluster sampling to obtain a more representative sample of local television stations. In this case, we used the viewership data provided in the Broadcasting and Cable Yearbook to divide local broadcasters into three separate categories according to audience size. Additionally, we divided up the sample according to network affiliation (including independents and shopping channels), and geographic location. Although the resulting sample was not completely random, these purposive techniques increased our ability to claim some representativeness of the resulting sample of television stations. The process for sampling within a single organization is very similar. If a researcher desires to obtain a more complete picture of the operations of a single media organization, she can assess (through an initial informant) the structural divisions of the organization, and then make sure to equally sample individuals across different departments or, depending on the focus of the research, across other key variables such as gender, age, race, and so on.
The most serious drawback to systematic sampling of media organizations (or within a single media organization) is that it almost inevitably requires you to make initial contacts with organizations and individuals who have no prior knowledge of you or your project. This means that most of the initial contacts you make are likely to be “cold calls,” and this greatly increases the difficulty involved with gaining the consent of media elites to participate in your study.

4. Gaining Access to Media Elites – Getting Beyond the “Firewall”

Once your background research is complete, your interview questions are written, and decisions about sampling have been made, the big challenge is actually locating individuals working in media organizations who are willing to sit down and talk with you one-on-one. I call this feat “getting beyond the firewall” because, like computer firewalls which block out nefarious Internet content, media organizations (like all organizations) erect numerous barriers which block outsiders from gaining access to organizational personnel and information. Gamson (1995) reflects on this hypersensitivity within media corporations to outside researchers. Recalling an interview with a Hollywood entertainment publicist, he notes (while “rolling [his] eyes”), that “this extreme and self-conscious relation to information control on the part of entertainment industry elites – and the assumption that the scale is weighted toward the unctuous – is a formidable obstacle for a researcher entering Hollywood, but an unsurprising one” (p. 84). How can outside researchers overcome these barriers, or at least finesse them in order to obtain much needed data from inside sources? The strategies that I have developed are not programmatic in any sense. They are the result of numerous instances of trial and error.

Who should you contact first? Should you start at the top of the organization, in the middle, or somewhere near the bottom? One qualitative organizational sociologist (Ostrander, 1993) suggests that starting “at the top” of organizations allows outside researchers to gain the
cooperation of key individuals in the organization and could unlock access to others. There are definitely strengths and weaknesses to this approach. Experience suggests that attempts to reach senior executives at major media organizations are likely to be rebuffed unless your research is part of a project developed in conjunction with the organization and is designed to specifically meet some of the goals of the organization. In other words, cold-calling News Corporation’s Rupert Murdoch is likely to be a losing strategy for a researcher attempting to land an interview with him. Additionally, if you attempt to contact top executives and they decide that your project is not in the interests of the organization, then they may instruct subordinates to ignore you, effectively closing the entire organization to you. Alternatively, if you try to “fly under the radar” of key decision-makers by focusing your interview attempts on middle management or other individuals lower in the hierarchy, there is a greater chance that you will receive more useful data about the organization.3

More often than not, interviews will be arranged by first contacting the potential interviewee via the telephone in order to arrange a convenient time for the interview to take place. Unless the media company or organization under investigation is located nearby or the researcher has funds to travel to the organization (usually unlikely), many interviews are likely to occur via the telephone. It’s perhaps obvious that face-to-face interviews have numerous advantages over telephone interviews. Being physically present allows you to make a real contact with an individual, demonstrate that you are interested in their organization, observe interesting nonverbal behaviors or reactions and, to some extent, control some aspects of the interview experience (explored more fully later in this essay). Despite these merits of face-to-face interviews, however, telephone interviewing of media professionals also has several

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3 This assumes, of course, that the kinds of information you’re looking for aren’t the exclusive purview of a few senior executives in the organization.
important merits to recommend. First, on tight budgets and limited time, telephone interviews can be conducted more quickly and with less disruption for both interviewee and researcher. Secondly, tape recording interviews conducted via the telephone is much less intrusive than in a face-to-face meeting by virtue of the fact that the tape recorder is nowhere to be seen. Additionally, in my own interviewing experience, media professionals are more likely to consent to an interview if it is via telephone, since this offers the least amount of disruption to their daily schedule.

When contacting potential interviewees, should you leave a voicemail message? Though this seems a trivial question, it is actually quite important in the process of gaining access to media elites. When you are trying to contact an individual whose name has been suggested to you by another media professional, or if that professional has already made an initial contact with the person, then it is usually not a bad practice to leave a message with a specific time when you will attempt to call again. However, when you are cold-calling an individual in an attempt to interview that person for a research project, it is generally a mistake to leave a message. There are two reasons for this. First, the degree of detail that you must use to explain your project on the individual’s voicemail service will inevitably confuse and decrease your chances for an interview. Second, unknown outside researchers will inevitably be low on the priority list for return telephone calls, so there is little to gain by leaving a message on an initial contact attempt.

Whether you are cold-calling an individual via telephone or (hopefully) following up on a suggestion or personal introduction from another interviewee, you will inevitably be asked (often multiple times, from multiple people) to explain what your study is about and why you wish to speak with a particular individual. You should always be prepared to summarize your research

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4 It is wise to never leave the “ball in their court,” so to speak. Always suggest that you will attempt to try and call again rather than waiting by the telephone for a return call that may be slow in coming.
for the person in question, or for their subordinate. Many scholars are surprisingly unable to briefly summarize their research for potential interviewees or for other constituents, yet this is a vital aspect of approaching the research. That being said, this summary should be done carefully, because you do not want to frighten off a potential interviewee or to be labeled as a problematic outsider to be contained and pushed aside. Thomas (1993:87) outlines several strategies for posing the most serious question or issue at hand. He recommends personalizing the interview for that respondent, such that the researcher tells the respondent that she wants to “‘get a better understanding about how you and your company think about [an issue].’” This strategy for framing questions has the benefit of telling the subject that you are interested in what they have to say, that you would like to learn from that person (the role reversal from scholar to subject), and that you are interested in specific issues and problems, not in vague generalities. Buchanan, et. al. (1988:57) even suggest avoiding using terms such as “research,” “interview,” and “publish,” since these words carry strong negative connotations which could dampen any potential enthusiasm for consenting to an interview.

Often the individual you are trying to reach may not be the person best suited to participate in an interview, and you may be “passed around” to others within the organization. In many cases, this can be a positive development and can result in a number of new contact names with excellent information. Sometimes, however, this process ends when the researcher is ultimately connected with the viewer relations/public relations office at the organization. These offices are the “firewalls” of any media organization, protecting information and individuals from outsiders like the press and academic researchers. Based upon my experience, once you’ve been connected with public relations in a media company, the chances of being connected with anyone else in the organization of potential value for your scholarly investigation are almost nil.
One solution is to try to move backwards to a different initial contact person or to abandon the telephone calling of that organization for a period of time before returning.

As you begin to build a list of potential interviewees via telephone or personal meeting, it is always advisable to keep a log of your conversations and messages left for individuals (see Table 2 below). This is vital, because if and when you get a phone call back, despite the fact that you may have left numerous telephone messages for individuals, you must immediately recognize the caller and explain to the person on the other end the reason for your telephone call (and perhaps interview him or her on the spot). I can recall on numerous occasions, after having received a return telephone call, trying to calmly converse with the person on the other end while scrambling to locate my log and identify precisely to whom I am speaking. When individuals you have contacted do not return your telephone calls right away, there is little downside to leaving a second, third, or even fourth message at appropriate time intervals. The key in contacting media professionals via the telephone is to be pleasant but persistent. Often, you are relying upon the goodwill of the individual (and sometimes their embarrassment after a series of telephone messages have been left for them without a response) to return your telephone call, but this technique has been a successful one for me in the past. In the studies where I have utilized this telephone calling strategy to contact media professionals for research interviews, I have achieved response rates of at least seventy-five percent.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Interviewee Name</th>
<th>Title/Position</th>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Telephone Number</th>
<th>Interview Date and Time</th>
<th>Notes</th>
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Depending upon the situation, generally a week to ten days is enough time to allow between an initial telephone call and a follow up call.
Once you have successfully located an appropriate media professional who agrees to an interview, the next step will be to schedule a convenient interview time. Since media professionals guard their time, sufficient lead time for the interview may increase your chances of getting more time with a respondent. As Thomas (1993:87) suggests, “executives tend to be far more generous with their schedules when you suggest a date a month or so away.” Quite often, however, the individual will have a few minutes to talk with you when you make the interview appointment, so it is vital to be immediately prepared to launch into the interview. As Buchanan, et al. (1988:55) explain:

It is necessary to exploit the opportunities offered in the circumstances. If, when setting up a study, you ask to speak to someone who you have learned is likely to be a key informant, and your contact discovers that this informant can give you half an hour of his time immediately, you cannot reply, ‘sorry, but I need a month to review the literature and pilot my questionnaire.’

Finally, some wary potential interviewees may want to see the interview questions in advance. Is this a wise practice? Sometimes, as Thomas (1993:84) explains, this can be advantageous in helping to structure or guide the interview, or to allow the respondent to bring along more relevant information. The downside is the risk that the questions will be circulated (perhaps to the organization’s legal department) and the interview is denied or severely curtailed. When the respondent requires the questions in advance, then there really isn’t an option. If withholding the questions means losing an interview, you should always send the questions.6

5. Qualitative Interview Protocols & Strategies

Once an interview with a media professional begins, the researcher is walking a tightrope of sorts. The goal of any interview with a media elite is to solicit as much useful information as

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6 However, you don’t necessarily need to send every single question you would like to ask. You can send a few and then see if you can pursue more questions during the interview session.
possible while not alienating the respondent. Much of this depends upon the speed with which
the researcher can establish some amount of trust and rapport with the interviewee, even within
the short duration of the interview.

One strategy to help build trust and to allow for the ethical treatment of the interviewee is
to establish a brief interview protocol statement which is read to respondents before each
interview. Individuals in the private sector are generally unfamiliar with the process of social
science interviewing. In this protocol, make it clear what you are going to do with the data and
assure that respondent that they will not be identified in any way with information the
information that they provide (in other words, that they will be anonymous in this interview).
Additionally, I have found it useful to allow the interviewee the opportunity to determine what is
on and off the record for the interview; to allow them to determine boundaries of confidentiality.
Although this means that the respondent has the power to “strike” information from the final
interview transcript, this downside is more than compensated by the increased trust generated,
which encourages the interviewee to be completely candid with you on certain subjects. Even if
I cannot quote the respondent on certain aspects of the interview, this candor has proved
invaluable in understanding some of the true dynamics in a media organization.

For the purposes of the interview, a tape recorder should be used to allow verbatim
transcriptions for the purpose of later data analysis. Tape-recording is another potential
flashpoint in the relationship between the researcher and the respondent, but it is a necessary
evil. Regardless of whether or not the researcher writes quickly, there simply is not enough time
to capture the richness of every detail in written notes during an interview. At the end of the
protocol, the researcher should ask for permission to tape-record the interview in a benign
manner. For example, I have simply asked on occasion, “If you don’t mind, I’d like to tape
record our interview so that I don’t have to scribble furiously while we talk.” Using this type of wording, I have had only one media professional decline to be tape recorded.

How long should the interview be? How much time a media professional allows you to interview them is usually inversely proportional to your usefulness for the organization. In other words, the less you have to offer the interview subject, the shorter your interview can be without alienating your respondent. Usually it is prudent to ask for a specific amount of time when scheduling the interview, and be faithful to that time commitment. When the time has elapsed in the course of the interview, I acknowledge that fact and ask for more time, saying something such as: “I realize that we are at the end of the time we had set for the interview. I have a couple more questions that I wanted to ask you – Would you mind if I ask those now?” In some cases when the respondent is pressed for time, I have been able to schedule another follow-up interview at this moment to answer the remaining questions. In any case, it is always advisable to be mindful of the respondent’s time constraints.

When media professionals are truly pressed for time or when they are somewhat suspicious of the intentions of an outside researcher, they may ask to respond to you in writing rather than verbally in person or on the telephone. Based upon my experiences interviewing elites at mass media organizations, however, allowing written responses in almost every case severely curtails the quality and quantity of data obtained about media production behaviors. Sending a list of questions and waiting for written answers simply places too much power in the hands of the respondent. Also, since written communications are more professionally and legally risky for business elites, they will tend to be much more circumspect or vague about key issues of potential concern to the researcher, negating much of the use value of the interview.
At the end of the interview, the last question should always be an open-ended, catch-all question such as the following: “Is there something that you find interesting/appropriate to this conversation/troubling that I haven’t asked you about?” This ensures that there is not something that is beyond the researcher’s knowledge or scope that the respondent is not very interested in explaining or revealing to the researcher. Sometimes, answers to this question reveal more than any of the previous answers to the planned questions! Also, at the end of the interview, it is always wise to use the opportunity to ask about whether or not the respondent can recommend other potential interviewees to you. This is the researcher’s opportunity to do some social engineering and is of particular use when the researcher is utilizing snowball sampling as the primary strategy for finding new respondents.

6. Power and the Elite Interview

One of the most unique and vexing aspects of elite interviewing is the power inequity between the researcher and the respondent in the interview process. Those in power are there because they have been taught through experience or instruction to be strategic about interpersonal communication, particularly with outsiders. As Gamson (1995) writes, “most members of the cultural elite of Hollywood not only take information battles for granted but are used to sizing up how much power they have in any given negotiation – and, as elites in an information-based hierarchy, are used to having the upper hand with outsiders” (p. 85). Because elites have little to gain (and much to lose) during encounters with outside researchers, they generally attempt to manage the encounter to either suit their aims or to blunt any control that may be asserted by the researcher. The danger here is that the power inequities between the respondent and the researcher will jeopardize the quality of the interview itself:
Elites are used to being in charge, and they are used to having others defer to them. They are also used to being asked what they think and having what they think matter in other people’s lives. These social facts can result in the researcher being too deferential and overly concerned about establishing positive rapport. (Ostrander, 1993, p. 19)

This dynamic is not something to be avoided or overcome (which is impossible, in any case), but the natural advantages of elites over outside researchers can be acknowledged and somewhat managed to put the researcher on more equal footing with elite media professionals.

In face-to-face interviews with elites, for example, appearances matter. If you are interviewing a member of the corporate elite, then it is best to “dress the part” such that there is not an inherent power imbalance to the eye. Formal dress is both a physical as well as a psychological strategy to communicate nonverbally that you are a serious researcher with a serious purpose. Over the telephone, this nonverbal signaling is made impossible, but a professional tone and firm resolve when asking questions can communicate a similar sense of self-possession when speaking with elites.

Making sure that you have obtained an extensive background knowledge on the organization is another strategy for equalizing power inequity. Many elite interviewees will engage in “sparring” with the researcher – that is, they will engage in one or two behaviors. First, they may use terms or jargon with which they are familiar and see if you ask them what they mean or to test you to see if you have some basic knowledge about the ways in which the organization works. If you are unfamiliar with some of these answers or terms, this provides them with a convenient opportunity to descend into an explanation of the terms (a mode which presumes a “teacher” and a “student”) and demonstrate competence or expertise to the researcher, reinforcing a hierarchy between the respondent and interviewer. Or, before the interview has even started, the respondent may pepper the researcher with questions, such as: “What are you trying to find in this research? What do you think you’ll find? Are you asking
questions of other people or organizations?” Or, better yet, “what have you been finding thus far?” These questions are legitimate may be entirely innocent, but they are potentially dangerous in that they may either (1) sidetrack the interview into irrelevant or safe topics (using up the precious little time you have for the interview on trivia), or (2) compromise the effectiveness of the interview by thwarting your questions altogether. Being polite without revealing too much information about your study can prevent these sidetracks and allow you to move forward to the questions at hand.

Researchers should be prepared for all personality types in their interview respondents. Although it may be easier to get “better” responses – meaning more detailed and helpful responses – from easygoing personalities, there may be a response bias in relying too heavily on these kinds of informants. Dealing with difficult respondents can also reveal interesting information about the organization, particularly if these individuals give short responses or cut the interview short after a particular question. During the interview, encouraging a conversational style for the encounter can be an effective strategy to try to defuse any potential power struggle. Often during the course of elite interviews, the respondent may reveal evidence of documentation or reports that may contain valuable information. How can outside researchers get access to these sensitive data about company processes or policies? Sometimes you can just ask for it, and it never hurts to do so. In the past I have sometimes been given access to extraordinary types of sensitive company information simply by asking for it. There isn’t necessarily a downside to asking for this information, either. If access to proprietary or other sensitive information is denied, the researcher should be understanding and then immediately continue with the interview without skipping a beat.
Conclusions

Although sociological studies of mass media production can be found in the media and communication research literature of the past seven decades, little in the way of methodological reflection or guidance is revealed in this literature, making it difficult for new scholarly endeavors of this sort without significant effort. Indeed, there are numerous pitfalls when studying elites at mass media organizations. These pitfalls arise largely from the power differential between researchers and these elites. They are also testaments to the skill with which media organizations have shielded their inner workings from public scrutiny. The fact that mass media organizations are difficult to penetrate for the purposes of research should not mean that these particular social institutions are simply left unexamined, however. In fact, the enormous control of media corporations and other entities over global information flows demands that scholars take the time to better understand the decisions and internal dynamics of these organizations.

To facilitate the inquiry in media production processes, this essay has outlined some strategies for negotiating the sometimes daunting task of studying media production from the vantage point of an outsider through qualitative techniques. The techniques I have outlined in this essay reflect both personal research experiences as well as the extant methodological discussions regarding qualitative interviewing techniques found in the organizational communication literature. As I have outlined, taking the time and care to extensively research the dynamics of media industries and to explore the market activities of specific media organizations can significantly improve the chances of obtaining valuable data from interviews with media elites. While these elites may zealously guard their time and are inherently suspicious about questions regarding their business practices, gaining access to these elites is not
impossible so long as the researcher is patient, persistent, and atuned to social cues. In the process of doing this type of research, I have observed that, as individual professionals, media elites are also proud of their and their organization’s accomplishments and are willing to engage with outsiders at least from this perspective. These strategies can open windows into media organizations through which outside scholars can glimpse individual actions, corporate policies, and power dynamics. As the community of media production scholars expands, it is my hope that methodological discussions and debates will begin to flourish and bring a renewed interest in the actions of media organizations.
References


Ostrander, S. (1993). ‘Surely you’re not in this just to be helpful:’ Access, rapport, and interviews in three studies of elites. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 22, 1, 7-27.


