



# VIEWPOINT

## The presentation of interpretivist research

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to offer a debate addressing the following issue: how can words fully express the meaning inherent in our observations, personal interviews and pictures when so much of it is subtle, hidden and contextually bound?

**Design/methodology/approach** – A debate is proposed regarding how we present our rich, meaningful data in the journals that Belk, Arnould, Wallendorf, and Holbrook (amongst others) have worked so hard to open to us. In so doing, we may be able to demonstrate more fully the power and insight that is offered by this research paradigm.

**Findings** – In 2001 Baraldi and Bocconcelli asked how we could possibly understand the beauty and magnificence of a Caravaggio masterpiece by reading a description of its colours, the intensity of each shade, the size of the details and the dimensions of the frame? Similarly, this paper contends that the interpretivist community should contemplate the rules (real or perceived) under which we publish our work.

**Originality/value** – The paper offers arguments against seemingly restrictive elements placed on authors' work in journal publications. Insights are offered on the use of the interpretive route.

**Keywords** Qualitative methods, Publications

**Paper type** Viewpoint

The strength and power of the interpretivist approach lies in its ability to address the complexity and meaning of (consumption) situations. We present our work with the goal of adding to knowledge, and inherent within this is gaining acceptance of our thesis by the reader. However, the restrictions placed on us by journals ensure that by describing it in the written form, the evidence we present is stripped of so much of its richness, depth and context that we can struggle to express its full interpreted meaning. Simply put, how can words fully express the meaning inherent in our observations, personal interviews and pictures when so much of it is subtle, hidden and contextually bound?

This paper proposes that a debate is required regarding how we want (indeed need) to present our rich, powerful data in the journals that Belk, Arnould, Wallendorf, and Holbrook (amongst others) have worked so hard to open to us. In so doing, we may find ways of demonstrating even more fully, the power and insight possible by this research paradigm.

This call is borne from a review of work already making efforts toward this goal and looking to capture the opportunities afforded by digital data, the world wide web and the e-enabled university library. In addition, it is borne of the writer's frustration with the written word and dissatisfaction at journal rules which appear to be dictated by the positivist's position. Finally, inspiration comes from Chenail's excellent 1995 article on presenting qualitative research.



**The need for change?**

In order to argue for this debate and changes that may come for it; first, an argument should be presented supporting this call for change. This will be addressed by discussing the characteristics of our paradigm, the nature of our data and its requirements for presenting work.

Byrne (2001, p. 372) talks about qualitative research being “contextually laden, subjective, and richly detailed”. This describes a situation where it is necessary for us to make detailed explanations and interpretations of data that can (and does) hold a myriad of meaning. For example, in Holt and Thomson’s (2004) article on man-of-action heroes, the authors make a convincing case that the words and actions of one informant, Donny, (who admits he would be a better woman than he is a man and whose favourites pastimes include making women’s clothing) demonstrate that his consumptions are an example of a man-of-action. It is fair to say that another interpretation is also possible!

Beyond subjectivity the interpretive paradigm is one that thrives upon subtlety, it is one where hidden and important meaning is buried within superficially inconsequential inflections of voice, body language or situational details. To demonstrate this, please follow this link to Caravaggio’s “Death of the Virgin”: <http://gallery.euroweb.hu/html/c/caravagg/07/45death.html>. Look at the uncovered feet and legs of the Virgin Mary. Our reality may be that, if we look carefully, all we can see are her feet and very little of her legs. However, to the catholic friars receiving the work, this subtle detail was too much and contributed to an interpretation that this was a scandalous portrayal of Mary and hence the painting was summarily rejected.

Interpretive research is also extremely complex as it involves the interaction of the individuals with themselves, family, society and culture (to name only some of the levels). Holt (1995) demonstrates this excellently. He uses extensive observations at a famous baseball ground to develop understanding of consumption and explicitly adds consumption-as-play to the existing consumption practices typology. This is based on data from fans and how they interact with each other, the team they support, the opposition, fellow fans, family members, the stadium and the goods they consume to highlight their fandom.

These characteristics place intricate demands on the researcher and on the strategies required to disseminate findings. A further vital influence on these strategies is the nature of the data we use to shape our interpretations and that need to be replicated in journal articles to convince the reader. The spoken and written word, observations of informants’ actions and interactions with the world and historical and secondary documents (as demonstrated by Holbrook’s (1995) use of personal photographs and Bank’s (1995) use of film) are all used by interpretive researchers. Within these, layers of meaning and complexity can be found by careful examination and training. This can be illustrated effectively by examples of the spoken word, body language and the physical setting. With the spoken word, information is found far beyond the mere words uttered and is conveyed via inflections, volume, tone, verbal mannerism and even pauses. The actions and body language of our informants (from a discussion or observational setting) including eye movements, position while seated and physical proximity are also critical for us to note and understand. Add to this the data from the physical settings of the phenomena, for example, the placement of a photograph in a particular position in a room or the clothes that an informant wears,

and we can see that we have a myriad of sources and forms of data each containing many layers of information. This, therefore, questions our reliance on predominantly the written word for its presentation.

We have discussed the characteristics of interpretive research and its data. Now, to develop our call for a debate on data presentation we explore the objectives of disseminating our work within journals and from here illustrate the need for change.

Inherent in publishing in journals is the goal of presenting our thesis, which (hopefully) is understood and accepted. A number of authors develop this further. Gummesson (1993) talks about “access” to the phenomenon; Brower *et al.* (2000) discuss the need to communicate “authenticity”, “plausibility” and “criticality”. Atkinson *et al.* (1991) talk about the importance of openness and the need to build trust with your audience.

In attempting to achieve these goals we use a wide range of techniques (many based around a story telling approach) to communicate their interpretations of the data. Fournier and Mick (1999) use a series of vignettes, Holt and Thomson (2004) provide two detailed case studies whereas Holt (1995) employs an extended case method and provides only one. In this way, these authors are answering Chenail’s call that qualitative research should “create round informants instead of flat ones in their papers” Chenail (1995, p. 4). A ubiquitous technique here is to illustrate important points with the use of exemplar quotes. Beyond this, pictures (Holbrook, 1995), diagrams and charts are commonly used.

However, it is here that we can start to see the essential conflict between what we are trying to achieve and the restrictions placed upon us by journals. We present quotes and case studies as though this is our data, but as we explored earlier our data are complex, layered and subtle and as we will return to later, it is also exceptionally difficult to describe in writing.

To develop this conflict further we now turn our attention to exploring the restrictions placed upon its affect and us. Table I contains a summary of the explicit guidelines provided by a number journals which routinely accept interpretive research.

| Journal                              | Submission guidelines                                                                                     | Additional comments                                                                         |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Journal of consumer research         | 30-60 pages<br>Word document only<br>Electronic submission<br>(File size less than 500kb only for review) | Black and white photos only                                                                 |
| Journal of consumer behaviour        | 2,000-6,000 words<br><br>Paper submission                                                                 | Black and white photos preferred                                                            |
| Qualitative market research          | 4,000-6,000 words<br>Submission via three copies<br>Various word processor formats acceptable             | 3.5in disk<br>Black and white photos<br>Various picture formats acceptable<br>tif, jpg, gif |
| Consumption, markets and culture     | 45 pages max                                                                                              |                                                                                             |
| ESIAM interpretive research workshop | 5 paper copies submitted<br>5 pages                                                                       | Photographs acceptable<br>300 kb pdf                                                        |

**Table I.**  
Article submission  
guidelines

Explicit here is that the written word is to be used as the basis for presentation. Also that pictures (as multimedia as they uniformly get) cause publishers difficulty and must be controlled, i.e. only black and white is acceptable and that they must be few in number-how else can we stay within the file size limit?

So what problems do these restrictions cause us? It can be argued that the most important issue is that it makes it difficult for us to achieve the goals we set for ourselves. We may be sure that our discussion skills have broken down access barriers getting in the way of the difficult and deeply held views of our informants but the data suggesting this can be subtle and non-verbal. Therefore, any restrictions on presenting this data can affect the trust building exercise between the researcher and the reader. More specifically, I would ask how can we demonstrate authenticity when we convert contextually laden observations or conversations into a few short sentences? How can we convince the reader of the plausibility of our interpretation when all we can provide them as support is written descriptions of a series of interrelated behaviours that were captured on hours of videotape? Beyond making some of our objectives for publishing difficult to obtain, these restrictions which can be viewed as coming from the positivist paradigm, may even reinforce the misplaced criticisms of sample size, validity and subjectivity.

At the centre of the problem with these restrictions is not the dominance of the written word but the lack of availability of multimedia formats with which to support our interpretations. The problem is that we present our data in a format that is not the same as the one in which it was collected. It must go through a transformation into a format in which all but the most talented of writers struggle to capture the true meaning and content of the spoken word, the actor's behaviour or the scene in which they are set. Consider these lines:

What's Montague? It is nor hand, nor foot, nor arm, nor face. O, be some other name.

Belonging to a man. What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other word would smell as sweet. William Shakespeare: *Romeo and Juliet* (c. 1591).

The beauty of these words is staggering, the longing it portrays is almost overwhelming, however, even the bard's work is only truly appreciated when set in "fair Verona" and the historical context surrounding the author and play understood.

We know that seeing and hearing aids our understanding. Moving back to the example of Caravaggio's *Death of the Virgin*, here the object and scene for interpretation is available to view (as opposed to the reader-constructed nature of the scene in *Romeo and Juliet*). How can we best capture the essence and meaning of the picture and convince the audience that our interpretation is trustworthy? We can write about it, but this certainly does not hint at the beauty that so enraptures Baraldi and Bocconcelli (2001). For example, "The painting is severe, sad and still. Under a red canopy hanging from a barely visible ceiling, the disciples are grouped round the corpse (fixed on a bed in rigor mortis), most standing to the left. . . Above her stands the young, mourning St John the Evangelist who had been given special charge of her" <http://gallery.euroweb.hu/html/c/caravagg/07/45death.html>. Only by displaying the picture in colour along with the text can we truly communicate its meaning.

In the interview or discussion setting, we can transcribe our interviews and use exemplar quotes but listening and viewing the original interviews is again much

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more meaningful. For example, below is part of a transcript of an interview with Noam Chomsky:

Noam: I was born in Philadelphia, in 1928. I stayed there until I went through undergraduate school at the University of Pennsylvania, then went on to Harvard for a couple of a years in a research fellowship, and graduate school. When I was done with that, went over to MIT, and I've been in Boston ever since.

Contrast this with your interpretation after watching it on video available at [http://webcast.ucsd.edu:8080/ramgen/UCSD\\_TV/6568ConHisNoaCho.rm](http://webcast.ucsd.edu:8080/ramgen/UCSD_TV/6568ConHisNoaCho.rm). His boredom and annoyance do not come through in the transcript at all, and even with notes describing it, the case is made far more forcible by watching the clip.

In this section, I hope to have made a clear case that these restrictions place an onerous burden on the interpretive researcher to use the written form to describe data that are much more powerful when presented in its original form. To conclude, I would now like to add to the debate by highlighting potential solutions and issues.

### **Solutions and issues**

Sandelowski (1998, p. 375) calls for qualitative researchers to be able to “select from an array of representational styles and formats, those that best fit their research purposes, methods, and data”. The literature provides us with examples of authors who have tried to achieve this. Waitzkin (1991) in his book, presents long sections of his transcripts and goes further by making the complete versions available via a national clearinghouse. The ACR has run a number of successful video ethnography sessions which allow researchers to explore their subjects using this medium. Indeed, consumption markets and culture have special DVD editions allowing different access to this increasingly regarded publication.

This paper started by calling for a debate on how we present our work in journals. This will include discussing the merit and concerns of using embedded video, voice recordings and pictures instead of transcripts and written description as the means by which support our interpretations. We should consider how multimedia clips can be incorporated into our final publications. It is a simple process to provide a url pointing to data (either edited or not) held on an individual academics web site, via the journals homepage or dedicated host. This debate will involve discussing video-based publications where narrative is intertwined with pictures and will also address engaging with publishers and editors.

However, done, this puts added demand on the researchers in terms of data preparation and presentation and also has financial costs. Beyond this it will place demands on the researcher and informer relationship. The benefits of making data available in this way will have to be weighed against the potential restrictions this may place on access to the phenomena. Experienced researchers know the value turning off the tape recorder has in providing additional information at the end of a discussion, knowing that the video may be available on the web may exacerbate the cause of this phenomenon. Also, whilst providing more data can be seen as superior to less, it does not immunise us against accusations of careful editing. What it does do, however, is further open our research to our audience and says- we have nothing to hide, here is our data, listen to it, view it and see if you agree with or at least accept our interpretation out of the many possible. The debate discussed here provides us with an opportunity to

close the gap between the complexity of the phenomenon we study, the richness of the data we use and the presentation of our thesis in academic journals.

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