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Being Blind or Forgetting? Research After All Is Re-Search

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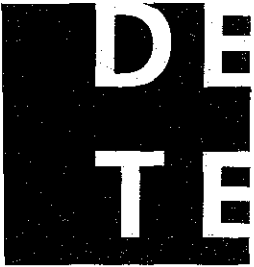
Being Blind or Forgetting? Research After All Is Re-Search

Abstract

Sometimes humans are well served by forgetting unique traumatic experiences that can ruin their future. But social phenomena are larger than individual lives and the challenge that Tilo Hartmann and Anne-Katrin Arnold's essay poses is important, not just for DGPuK.

Being Blind or Forgetting?

Research after all is re-search BY KLAUS KRIPPENDORFF



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Sometimes humans are well served by forgetting unique traumatic experiences that can ruin their future. But social phenomena are larger than individual lives and the challenge that Tilo Hartmann and Anne-Katrin Arnold's essay poses is important, not just for DGPK. Let me elaborate on their fourth concern:

Research after all is re-search, searching available records of past happening, again and again, until patterns emerge that are worthwhile to talk about with colleagues. Epistemologically, all research is rooted in the past, but confined to records that one was able to generate or that survived the actions of others. With the past principally inaccessible, truth becomes a meaningless research criterion. Trust in the quality of the researched records is what counts. When records are not kept, information of present significance are omitted or distorted, that trust is broken and the lessons of past happenings become questionable. Hartmann and Arnold have reasons to worry about the future of a field that is too selective about the records it keeps.

Understanding processes of communication from records makes its demands on what needs to be recorded. Minimally, evidence about communication needs to inform about who, says what, to whom, in which medium, and how its context is thereby reconstructed and altered. But perhaps the most important evidence concerns the dynamic nature of communication. In communication people, agencies, or institutions are interactively involved and find themselves altering their perspectives on each other, their worlds, and their actions. Thus, researchers of communication are always facing multiple perspectives playing with and against each other: dialogue.

The field of communication is known for its inter-disciplinarity. Unfortunately, this often is translated into the permission to adopt the perspectives of other academic disciplines, for example, of sociology, economics, political science, or psychology; and to use methods of recording and re-searching data that are common in such disciplines, for example, doing surveys, correlating money flows with institutional behaviors, or experimenting with individual subjects. There is nothing wrong with employing multiple perspec-

tives, the more the better, provided these perspectives include those that participate in the phenomenon of interest, i.e., the perspectives of the observed communicators, readers, users, and stakeholders.

But disciplines are not merely academic categories. They are regimes that discipline their disciples to think in discipline-specific ways, enforce certain ontological assumptions, encourage certain theoretical/explanatory frameworks, legitimize certain methods of analysis, and generate records (data) that deliberately deviate from what

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ordinary communicators know, are concerned with, and do. Generating records from the perspective of particular disciplines entails the danger of preventing their re-searchers from recognizing phenomena of communication that do not fit their disciplinary perspectives. Single-perspective researchers are doomed to study their own frameworks. Blindness is possibly worse than mere memory loss.

Let me give three examples of obvious blindness. First, research of media products themselves – by traditional content analysis, for example, or by tracing the histories of publications or the writings of journalists. I suppose „Publizistik,“ the German „newspaper science,“ attempted to theorize published matter. Actual publications are records of convenience and easily re-searched. But they make invisible the institutional processes that produced them, how they were read, by whom, and what they did. While publication dates can locate published records in time, they manifest no evidence of interactivity, nothing about how the readers or viewers participated in their production.

Second, survey research, efforts to measure changes in attitude or voting consequent to media exposure, or evaluation of campaign effectiveness, are all tied to individuals. These methods generate easily analyzable records but drive the social out of the theories intended to explain these records – not by intention but for the convenience of interviewing or observing individuals rather than accounting for their parts in practices of communication and for the preference for statistical accounts: Counting requires independent units of enumeration and in communication research, this independence is easily achieved by separating individuals from the social fabric of their lives. For this very reason, pollsters do not measure public opinion, as they claim, but redefine it as a statistical aggregate of individual opinions. This practice systematically eliminates evidence of the very communication that constitutes the public nature of public opinion. Such recording practices reify individualism. But in a strange twist, they also reduce humans to subjects, to individuals who are willing to comply with whatever is demanded of them: answering interview questions truthfully, following the instructions of experimenters and in tests, or accepting being subjected to experimental conditions of interest to a researcher. Records generated under these constrained conditions depict cultural dupes, contain evidence of individuals' manipulability, and render them serviceable to institutional interests, but fail to shed light on how people engage each other in communication.

Third, the role of the researcher vis-à-vis the observed. Communication is fundamentally a process, not a thing. It involves people as creative participants, not as passive bystanders. Communication is dialogic, not monologic, and should be understood as such. Describing something as monologue, for example, as one-way communication, conveniently omits from the records the circularity involved, the feedback that would make communication comprehensible. Besides discounting crucial perspectives, to which theorists consider themselves entitled, there is also another meaning of

monologue: describing something in terms of a single logic, the logic of external observers, theorists, who, unlike the participants involved, can hold on to their disciplinary (mono)logic, without being challenged by the process of communication being re-searched. It is of course an illusion to believe that observational records could write themselves and that scientific observers could be absolved of the responsibility for creating them. But recording communication from the perspective of an observer, as a non-participant, as a theoretician with a superior perspective, dismisses the perspectives of the constituents of communication and what is most central, the dialogical nature of communication.

These are only three disciplinary blind spots. Not noticing them, or worse, recognizing them but not doing anything about them, does not bode well for a field that vibrates from multiple perspectives, multiple constructions of reality – in dialogue. ♦

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