Should We Trust Their Statements? Discussing Trust Issues in Media Production Studies

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Abstract

This methodological article discusses trust and credibility in media production studies with a particular focus on four trust issues. These four trust issues concern industry informants' explicit and implicit agendas, ambiguities in interviews, transparency about relational work, and trusting observations. Particularly, the goal of our article is to debate how both students and researchers in media production studies can address such issues around trust and improve the transparency in our studies. While we suggest that we should always ask ourselves why informants say what they say and be curious about what motivates them to give certain statements, we as researchers also need to show that the public can trust our research by being open about the relationships that we build with these industries.

Keywords: *Qualitative Methods, Methodology, Transparency, Relational Work, Interviews.*

Introduction

In media production studies, researchers often use methods such as interviews and observations to obtain information about production processes. For these kinds of studies, there

are several methodological issues around trust that we wish to bring attention to. As the title indicates, we wish to discuss when we should trust statements particularly from industry informants in media production studies. With this, we suggest that the concept of *trust* can work as a methodological umbrella term that encompasses many different central issues and dynamics that arise when conducting a media production study.

Based on these considerations, our article will discuss the following research questions: *How is trust a methodological challenge for media industries research, and how can we as researchers address trust issues in our studies*?

In this context, we wish to define trust as

> [. . .] the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party.[3]

This definition by Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman (1995) hails from the field of organization and management studies and highlights the relational aspects of trust, in particular how vulnerability and the expectation of a certain action are key elements of trust. With this definition, trust is based on one party expecting that the other party will tell the truth. In relation to media industries research, there are three parties involved—namely, the researcher, the industry informant, and the reader—that all make themselves vulnerable by placing trust in each other at certain moments. The *researcher's vulnerability* is that they must trust the industry informant to tell them the truth. The *industry informant's vulnerability* is that they must trust the researcher to represent statements in a fair way in their eventual publication since they can take the information that the informant has provided in many different directions. And finally, the *reader's vulnerability* is that they must trust that proper academic standards for media industries research have been followed in that publication. As we will argue throughout the article, these vulnerabilities around trust come in to play in various ways when conducting a media production study, and they will often benefit from a high level of transparency from all the parties involved.

With this discussion of trust, we wish to bring attention to how the field of media production studies can improve by becoming more transparent about research methods and by reflecting more on the trustworthiness of statements from industry informants. To be clear, our intention is by no means to discredit qualitative research methods such as interviews and observations but rather to further the discussion of trust in relation to these methods within the field of media production studies.

In the following sections of this article, we will review the existing literature on media industry research methods and then proceed with more in-depth discussions of four specific trust issues: *explicit and implicit agendas*, *ambiguities in statements from industry informants*, *transparency about our own relational work*, and *trust when conducting observations*. Altogether, our goal with this is to provide a necessary and didactic discussion not only of trust and the potential pitfalls but also of the possible solutions that media industries researchers may experience.

Media Industry Studies and Researcher-Industry Relationships

As our theoretical framework, we draw on media industries research and its subfield media production studies. These research fields have existed since the 1950s through classic studies of film,[4] television,[5] and news production.[6] However, these fields have kept going and gained more momentum in recent decades, where many new studies and anthologies have been published in media production studies.[7]

In media production studies, researchers have adapted methods such as interviews and participant observations from other disciplines, particularly ethnography and anthropology. Because anthropologists have been using these methods for so many years, there is a plethora of recommendations for how anthropologists should handle the many challenges they might encounter during fieldwork[8]—also in a digital context.[9] Still, because there has been this large wave of new media production studies in the last 15–20 years, we argue that it is necessary to have a field-specific discussion of methodology and transparency within media production studies, for which the anthropological recommendations may not always fit.

A similar distinction between the methodological needs of media production research versus anthropology has been made by Bruun and Frandsen (2022).[10] They argue that media production researchers are usually *not* studying a foreign culture but often a more familiar culture in a media organization. The media researcher may even share a similar educational background, mutual acquaintances, or certain academic interests with employees of that organization. Another difference is that the media researcher is usually already knowledgeable about "[. . .] the genre-specific expectations that guide the production of media products" and is "[. . .] familiar with the products/artefacts from both a recipient perspective and from a professional media perspective."[11] These differences compared with anthropology will also have practical implications, as the media researcher may not be interested in a culture in general but potentially only in a very specific part of the production process, which may be taking place during a very short period of time. This means that we might spend less time doing fieldwork than some anthropologists, but as Bruun and Frandsen argue, this also means that, for us, "[. . .] less time-consuming methods and ways of working do not necessarily threaten the quality of research."[12] Another important detail that we wish to emphasize is that media organizations have strategic goals that they want to achieve, and when we study them, they often try to "sell" themselves to us. Overall, this means that we as media production researchers can defend approaching such fieldwork in a slightly different manner by, for instance, focusing on a specific subprocess or using shorter observation periods, as we will discuss in a later section about observations.

While our intention is to discuss trust in relation to industry informants' statements, we wish to first point to the simultaneous need for more explicit methodological reflections about the transparency and trustworthiness of our own studies and in media production studies as a field. Even though many media production studies use interviews and observations of industry people as data sources, not all of these contain methodological descriptions and reflections on how the study was conducted. For example, in John T. Caldwell's book[13] about

his 13-year-long study of the American film and television industry, he delivers many valuable insights, but he does not explain who he has interviewed, how he selected these informants, or how he negotiated access to the productions in question. In such cases, we assume that this is a conscious choice made by the researcher to not describe these particular circumstances. Of course, we ought to perhaps also recognize that it can feel like a hassle to provide such information on top of all the other tasks that the researcher must carry out. However, we would argue that not providing these pieces of information is harmful to the study's trustworthiness because the lack of transparency about people and places makes it impossible for others to assess the sources that the study's conclusions were based on. If we do not live up to these standards, we ultimately make our studies vulnerable to criticism and potential accusations. In classrooms, this is also something that we need to repeatedly explain to students in media industry studies classes who sometimes forget to provide enough transparency to ensure the trustworthiness of their study. For that exact reason, we hope that this article can help explain the intricacies of trust issues in media industries in a way that can help both students and teachers in this field.

All of this motivates the following discussion of trust, and in this article, we concentrate on two ethnographic methods: interviews and observations. What distinguishes them from other popular methods (such as document analysis, content analysis, or various quantitative methods) is that they require us to establish relationships with specific people—also called relational work, which we will return to in a later section. Generally, when considering the number of media industry studies that use these ethnographic methods, not many have prioritized discussions of their own trustworthiness, ethics, or their researcher-industry relationships, as Patrick Vonderau has also pointed out: "Researchers relegate them to footnotes or, less frequently, to method confessionals and epilogues hidden in the back of their books."[14]

There are, however, some media production scholars who have specifically discussed methodological issues concerning the relationships between researchers and the industry, which has inspired our efforts here.[15] Another important reason for why we should discuss these relationships is to avoid that our production studies are regarded as overly positive "best-practice" presentations of industry cases. We have experienced first-hand that when we fail to write about our own methods and about our position as independent researchers, we can quickly be misunderstood as being too friendly toward our industry subjects—even when this was not our intention. For example, this has happened to us when studying the processes behind specific television shows, where readers and reviewers have occasionally assumed that our studies were trying to shine a positive light on these shows, even though this was not the purpose of our publications. For this exact reason, we recommend more openness about these issues in media production research. In the following section, we will expand on how media production scholars can avoid being misunderstood as being too friendly by being more mindful of the agendas that industry informants might have.

Industry Informants' Explicit and Implicit Agendas

First and foremost, we wish to make a distinction between two certain kinds of agendas that industry informants can have. We can divide these agendas into the explicit and the implicit,

while remembering that they also can have both. *Explicit agendas* are statements where informants overly declare their objectives and suggestions on how researchers should perceive their work. We can also think of this kind of practice as *trade stories*[16] or as a *sales pitch*[17] intended to convince us of the positive aspects of their work. In our experience, the sales pitch can especially happen when you interview industry informants in executive or managerial positions, also because they are experienced and used to playing this role and may have been interviewed regularly by various reporters and researchers wherein they have practiced how to sell a positive image of their organization. Many of them have pitched the projects that they are being interviewed about a great many times before and are therefore generally self-aware.[18] In fact, this happened to one of us when interviewing the head of the Danish youth TV channel DR3, Irene Strøyer. Whenever the topic was about DR3's strategic intentions or the channel's brand, Strøyer would give what sounded like a rehearsed speech about the channel's key values. It later turned out that these statements were almost identical to quotes that she had previously given to Danish news media.[19] In that kind of situation, the interview and that kind of rehearsed sales pitch can feel disappointing when you are hoping for a more open-hearted and trusting dialog. However, if we know beforehand that we can often expect sales pitches and explicit agendas from informants of this type, we can make an informed choice and choose such informants when we specifically need a sales-oriented statement about the organization. For instance, such a sales pitch would be valuable data for studies of how media organizations present themselves, how they understand their own brand, or what their official stance toward a certain topic is. Naturally, we should still be mindful of their motivations and skeptical of whether we are getting the whole story in that kind of interview.

In the case of *implicit agendas*, it can be more difficult to decode the informant's intentions. In interactions with such informants, we might get the feeling that they would like us as researchers to play a particular role for them or that we are being used in, for instance, a larger political or organizational disagreement, either in society in general or within their department. An informant might have invited us to give a presentation for their department and present our findings, without us knowing that it was intentionally to justify a certain managerial decision. In that scenario, we need to realize that we are being used, and not in the most flattering way.

At other times, their statements can reveal specific kinds of industry myths or *industry lore*,[20] as Timothy Havens and Amanda Lotz have described, where doubtful claims have become naturalized truths within an industry culture. Such practices can be rather subconscious, less intentional, and more excusable, but these give us yet another reason for being skeptical of what they tell us.

Generally, if the informants seem overly confident or do not display some kind of self-criticism or doubt, we tend to regard them as less trustworthy. Some industry informants are good at being self-critical and honest about their struggles, but occasionally we do encounter informants who give untrustworthy statements such as a blatant sales pitch or by reciting an industry myth. When it comes to these explicit and implicit agendas, these present us with a dilemma: Should we *tell the informants* that we do not trust those statements?

We can imagine a scenario where we have spent a lot of time negotiating access and we have finally managed to get an interview. During the interview, however, the industry

informant's statements are coming across as untrustworthy, which pushes us to decide whether we should tell them and even ask probing questions or not. At times, we decide to remain silent because we worry that criticism might jeopardize the hard-earned relationship between us. Especially if we have received the access as a gift or as a one-way transaction, it can make us act timidly because that access feels more fragile.[21] Another explanation may be that we are afraid of being regarded as rude researchers who dare to frame industry professionals as liars. Consequently, many academics are hesitant to express overt mistrust or criticism of industry professionals' statements in ways that would cause them to lose face. Herein lies a fundamental dilemma for media production researchers: Since access negotiations can already be rather difficult, we are usually inclined to be less overtly critical simply *because we fear that it could make future access negotiations even more difficult*.

These trust issues are not uncommon in production studies, and we suggest that transparency is the best policy when addressing these. If we as researchers discover a trust issue during the interview, we can try to ask probing questions to uncover more about it or even address it directly and see how the informant reacts. Yet, we recognize that this approach is not necessarily without problems. If a researcher says that an informant's claims cannot be trusted, the relationship between them may suffer, and the informant might feel betrayed. Nevertheless, we would argue that being transparent about potential problems and dubious claims in these industries is a part of the researcher's obligation to the public. Therefore, even if we do not point out their untrustworthy statements to their face, we should at least point out in our later publication of the study that there could be an issue with the trustworthiness of their statements. However, it may sometimes only be later in the coding or writing process that we as researchers realize that there is a trust issue. In such cases, we find that doubts and criticisms can be expressed more accurately and subtly in the writing process, because it is asynchronous and allows us to think about the language that we use to describe it, than in face-to-face interactions. We have also previously used a "member checking" by sending the written quotes of their statements that we used in our drafts to our informants so that they could check them for factual errors, and in these situations, they have often not replied and rarely had any objections. Additionally, it is also our experience that publication time works in our favor: When the study is finally published, industry informants have often moved on to other projects and may not care about their past statements about former products in the same way.

Furthermore, on several occasions after posing critical questions to industry informants, we have still received positive feedback from them, and the mutual relationship remained intact. The explanation for this is probably that some industry informants–especially those in executive or managerial positions–may be quite used to critical questions and even see them as productive rather than as a personal attack. With this in mind, we should perhaps not be afraid of criticizing them. Yet, asking critical questions directly to industry informants while maintaining their trust can be a delicate process that requires certain diplomacy skills from the researcher, which may entail asking the most critical questions at the end of the interview.[22] Still, when debating these issues, it is important that we as scholars are careful not to unjustly demonize or vilify practitioners working in these industries, as David Craig also has stated.[23]

Ambiguities and the Construction of Meaning

There are reasons why we should also give industry informants the benefit of the doubt. In fact, when interviewing industry informants, we can encounter several kinds of ambiguity, and the first is *organizational pluralism*. This concerns how organizations can have several competing goals and independent interests within different departments, which can lead to internal organizational disagreements about certain topics.[24] Therefore, we (and the readers of our publications) need to know precisely where in the organization the informant works, as a statement from someone in a different department might yield a rather different response. At the same time, this speaks to the importance of multisited fieldwork[25] also in media production studies because combining sources from different sites within the organization usually yield more trustworthy conclusions. Compared to the explicit and implicit agendas, organizational pluralism as a trust issue is not as severe or problematic, but it is still important to be mindful of.

The second kind of ambiguity is *self-contradictions* and how informants can give statements that ultimately contradict each other. This can be confusing for us as researchers who are trying to find out what they precisely mean. We should usually investigate self-contradictions to find out whether the informant is aware of them–because they might not be conscious contradictions. In such a situation, where we investigate self-contradictions, we again run the risk of them losing face or feeling exposed, and thereby jeopardizing the relationship. Nonetheless, we might find that it is a necessary risk and that we need to check whether this is a conscious or unconscious self-contradiction. In other instances, it can be a self-contradiction between what they say and what they do. If we have conducted a production study using both interviews and observations, we give ourselves the possibility of comparing the respective results from those two methods.[26] This can lead to an interesting analysis of why their statements contradict their actions, and for instance, if this might be a case of cognitive dissonance where someone's actions and opinions do not match.

The third kind of ambiguity is *wavering opinions*. Informants have not always made up their mind about certain topics until we suddenly start asking them a series of questions. As contributions from psychology indicate, meanings are to some extent also constructed *during* conversations between researchers and informants about their work. As Stephanie Taylor has suggested: "A more complex and nuanced understanding of these processes is offered by writers in critical discursive and narrative psychology [. . .] In such an approach, identities are assumed to be constituted in ongoing talk."[27] If we subscribe to this perspective on creative work and professional identities, we should consider how our questions to industry informants are likely to prompt processes of self-reflection and that we as interviewers play a part in enabling informants to formulate narratives about themselves and their work.

Another possible explanation for both self-contradictions and wavering opinions is that the informant simply misunderstood the question. For that reason, we can take certain steps to make sure that they stand by their statements (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015), for instance by asking: "So am I right in understanding that you think that . . ." In our experience, not all informants are used to doing a lot of reflection-on-action,[28] which is what we might be prompting with our questions about their work, also sometimes retrospectively about their previous

work. In summary, when it comes to their statements, it may be wise to simultaneously give industry informants the benefit of the doubt, to remember these ambiguities, and suggest that they can usually have several possible explanations.

Transparency About Relational Work

At this point, we will shift from focusing on informants to focusing on the trustworthiness and lack of transparency in media production studies as a discipline. As researchers in media production studies, we may tend to focus our attention on results and findings in our publications and neglect to explain how we managed the relational work. To some extent, this is understandable and can also be explained by the formats we write in and by the fact that many journals prefer articles that deliver results rather than lengthy methodological descriptions of the relationships we cultivate with our informants. Yet, in our experience, the relational tasks of negotiating access and appeasing industry informants are a big part of doing production studies. They can be time-consuming and can have a major impact on what we can study. If we are good at this kind of diplomacy, we may be able to study otherwise hidden and secretive processes, which can yield very valuable insights. Instead, if we disregard diplomacy, we risk rejection from informants and having to change our research design because our initial plan may no longer be possible.

Relational work has to do with the informal practices of being diplomatic, building relationships, and conveying politeness.[29] It is a valuable skill not only for industry people but indeed also for media production researchers, especially when we are trying to navigate industry cultures where it might be necessary to cultivate networks and build trust over time.[30] In fact, our ability to establish trust and conduct relational work wisely will often affect the quality of the data we collect.[31] Being good at relational work is especially useful when conducting interviews and observations but also when attending industry events, which in themselves can be valuable sources of data due to the many interesting displays of diplomacy, networking, and politeness.

As part of our relational work in production studies, there is the central issue of *access* and how we get permission to conduct interviews and observations. This topic has been described by several media production scholars. For instance, Kirsten Frandsen has suggested that we can get access *as a gift* or *as a trade*.[32] If we get access as a gift, it means that we get it freely without giving something back to the informant. While this at first seems easy on the researcher, it can make us feel in debt to that organization and make it difficult to take a critical stance toward them, since they can quickly remove that access (which can be a frightening situation). If we get access as a trade, we give something back, like a report or a presentation, and this creates a more equal and transactional relationship, as Frandsen points out.[33] In addition, Vonderau describes both short encounters and long partnerships with informants as well as the benefits that the researcher can gain through more formalized collaborations with industry partners: “For instance, scholars may benefit from funding, access to data, insider status, and increased public visibility, while providing a company with commercially disinterested, comprehensive, and comparatively inexpensive insights not to

be gained elsewhere."[34] However, not all scholars may want such a formalized relationship as some prefer to conduct their work using a more informal approach.[35]

We also need to be aware of the power dynamics between researchers and informants that various kinds of collaborations can entail. Certainly, as Hanne Bruun has pointed out, industry people have power over us because they can be "exclusive informants" with the exact knowledge that we want to acquire, and in some cases, it might be only a few people that possess that much-needed knowledge.[36] This means that they are not necessarily elites as they might not have an elite or managerial position within their organization or field, since their exclusivity and desirability as data sources come from the knowledge that they personally possess.[37] Additionally, several scholars suggest that our access requests are usually more successful when we demonstrate flexibility (in terms of where and when to meet up) and when we appeal to the informants by mentioning their experiences and achievements as individuals.[38] Recently, it has unfortunately become clear that major streaming companies and global media players consistently deny access, constituting a near-impossible challenge for production studies scholars.[39] In our experience, many media companies in our national context are quite open and willing to speak to researchers, which may suggest that geographical and cultural proximity as well as a shared local network can be advantageous when negotiating access. Still, we usually try ahead of time to come up with a "plan B" in terms of cases and informants if our first choice rejects our requests.

Because relational work and access negotiations are decisive but not very visible parts of our work, transparency is of the utmost importance. We argue that in studies of media industries and media production, we should declare *who* our informants are (names and/or job titles), *where* they work, and *what kind of relationship* we have with them. All these pieces of information are usually necessary to uphold the trustworthiness of the study, and without them, no one can assess the legitimacy of our claims, as we pointed out in the case of Caldwell's book. Describing the nature of our relationship with the informants is especially important if we have been a part of their organization. We should declare if we have previous work experience within or are currently hired by the organizations we study, which some media production scholars have used successfully to get access to study those organizations.[40] In this context, we should also declare whether the informants have given their informed consent and are aware of the fact that we are studying them.[41] Informed consent is also important, for example, to ensure that the researcher and the informant are in agreement about when data are being collected and when the information provided by the informant is on the record vs. off the record, which especially applies if the researcher is shadowing informants and hanging out at the workplace for longer periods of time.

Additionally, it is very important to know where in the organization our informants are placed. The reason for this is that we should always *defend* our selection of cases and informants and why we have chosen these sources instead of others. Of course, depending on the study's primary focus, different people in the organization could be relevant and valid choices.

Especially if it is a large organization, selection and sampling strategies are necessary and useful choices that make the data collection more manageable.[42] However, just like we should defend our case selection in case studies,[43] we should also defend our selection of departments and informants since they typically function as a second-level case or a

case-within-the-case. Especially when we work with very few cases, identifying the organization(s), department(s), and informant(s) becomes crucial. In this context, there are usually both advantages and disadvantages in choosing specific informants since they contribute with a particular perspective within the organization.

However, one exception from our recommendation about total transparency is when we purposefully give informants *anonymity* for ethical reasons. Anonymity may especially be relevant when we are studying sensitive topics such as salaries or gender discrimination.[44] In such cases, we have ethical obligations to keep our sources anonymous to protect them from retaliation and backlash. In other cases, not mentioning informants' names can be relevant if we are doing a more macro-oriented study of industry informants where we are not studying the individuals but their profession and where we treat all the informants as a bigger, collective sample (e.g., if we study over 50 different radio producers).

Another issue related to transparency in our relational work is *confidentiality*. Some organizations can insist that the researcher needs to sign a nondisclosure agreement (NDA), which to various degrees can keep the researcher from disclosing information obtained from that organization. Of course, this is usually not a feasible solution for those of us who want to publish about the organizations that we study, also because the confidential information can then only function as our own personal background knowledge. For our students, however, the situation is a little different since they (at least in the Danish university system) have the option to decide that their exam papers cannot be seen or borrowed by others but can only be read by the assessor(s). The biggest downside to this solution is that other students never can learn from the findings in such studies, and therefore, it should generally be avoided. Usually, before the students begin their fieldwork, we recommend that if they make their study confidential, they should think of confidentiality as something that is connected to their access negotiations and that they should not give confidentiality away freely. Instead, they should use it for "access as a trade" and get the organization to promise that they will in fact give the students very valuable information in return for that confidentiality.

These considerations all demonstrate that we rely greatly on relational work and on the information that informants choose to share with us, which is why cultivating trust between the informants and us as researchers is crucial. Whether we are talking about relational work, access, anonymity, or confidentiality, we maintain that transparency is usually the best practice and encourage openness about these issues in our field.

Trust When Conducting Observations of Media Production

Until now, this article has focused on the trust issues that can arise during interviews. In addition to this, we wish to also give some consideration to how conducting observational studies can create yet another set of trust issues, and how the aforementioned issues may even be intensified during observations. As mentioned earlier, production studies have been inspired by anthropologists and their use of either naturalistic or participant observations. Yet, as production studies scholars, we also need our own specific considerations about

what happens when we conduct observations of media organizations and their employees, which can be described as rather different from observing foreign cultures.[45]

In media production studies, we approach such fieldwork in a slightly different manner with, for instance, shorter observation periods that may only last a few weeks or months. For example, in the study of the idea development processes at a Danish TV channel, it made sense to choose a short observation period of a few months and stop observing once the idea development and pitching sessions were over. In that situation, a longer observation period would not have resulted in more data about their idea development but only about other processes at the channel.[46] However, if and when you use shorter observation periods, this method and the validity of the findings that it generates will of course benefit from being combined with other research methods.[47] If doing observations is just one of several methods in a production study and you use shorter observation periods, the downside is that you probably only get a partial picture of the production culture that you have observed. However, those other methods and data sources can hopefully confirm (or correct) your analysis of their production processes.

Conducting these observations will usually require more mutual trust and that you negotiate *a more extensive kind of access* than what you need for just doing an interview. The reason is that you are asking them for permission to come and observe them for a longer period than an interview, which can be done more quickly in an hour or so. Therefore, observations require more vulnerability from industry informants, and, subsequently, observations can prompt more *mistrust* from them than an interview can.[48] We have also experienced this firsthand, and it seems that some industry informants display a lot of mistrust and doubt when we ask to observe their work processes, perhaps because they feel judged, fear that they are doing something wrong, or fear that we will expose practices that others might see as problematic. Likewise, this issue has been mentioned recently by Anna Zoellner, who writes that the TV practitioners she observed became very self-aware and would say "don't write that down."[49] As another example from the aforementioned study of the youth channel DR3, mistrust or paranoia led two managers working at DR3 to ask one of the authors to hand over all his notes and recordings at one point. In that case, the researcher's response per email was that he had nothing to hide and that they were more than welcome to look through his many hours of recordings and all his notes–although they never responded to that or followed through on their request.[50] This example can also serve as a reminder of how access negotiations are not necessarily only done once and how organizational paranoia can make it a recurring issue. In such cases, the best approach is probably to reassure them by being open and honest about your intentions and by telling them that you are not keeping any secrets.

Another aspect of doing observations is how anthropologists have been known to write *thick descriptions* in the form of prosaic diaries, retelling the events that they have experienced.[51] Concerning diaries and note-taking about observations in general, these sources require that the readers trust the researcher's subjective narrative about what happened. However, not all researchers feel comfortable about creating and sharing such a subjective narrative or making it their primary data source, and ultimately, your approach to how you document your observations may depend on what research tradition you are coming from. That is why we as media production scholars have personally been less inclined to write lengthy thick descriptions or diaries but have instead primarily documented our observations by sharing

field notes, audio recordings, video recordings, or acquiring industry documents as useful data sources that can support our analysis. In summary, this documentation issue especially relates to how much we trust our own experiences and how much we want to feature these personal narratives in our publications.

While we have described some of the trust issues that you can encounter when conducting observations, we still recognize that observations as a method contain many additional issues–especially in the case of more detailed studies of cultures and regarding the researcher's degree of participation in the unfolding events, that have not been elaborated on in this publication. Instead, we have focused on explaining how observations are indeed connected to the presented trust issues but can require a more extensive kind of access, can be met with mistrust from practitioners, and can raise several questions about how much researchers trust their own experience of the observed events. Altogether, this should not deter anyone from doing observations of media production. Instead, we want to underline how doing relational work and building mutual trust are indeed vital skills in such studies.

Conclusion

As the question in title of this article suggests, we can ask whether we should trust industry informants' statements. This is a relevant dilemma for anyone who is studying media industries and their production processes and our question is meant to create reflections in our field about informants' trustworthiness. In this regard, we have suggested that we should always be aware of informants' explicit and implicit agendas, ask ourselves why informants say what they say, and be curious about their motivations. Simultaneously, we are the ones asking the questions that prompt these statements and activate their self-awareness, so we should also be mindful of how their statements can contain ambiguities and various competing meanings at the same time. When it comes to production studies, we should provide transparency about the relational work that we do to build researcher–industry relationships to show that our findings are still trustworthy. In positivist research, studies can be replicated, but in our qualitative studies of media industries, other researchers cannot replicate what we have done, and for this exact reason, we need to provide a high level of transparency and reflexivity about our methods.[52] Finally, we have considered how observations can be met with additional mistrust from some practitioners and can require better access.

Furthermore, this discussion highlights how challenging and delicate the process of conducting a media production study is. As we have argued, such a study requires mutual trust and therefore vulnerability from both the researcher, the industry informant, and the reader. Among the many challenges in a media production study, access negotiations constitute a particular hurdle that can lead the researcher to respond in an overly friendly way to appease industry entities. This creates the risk of our studies becoming less critical and even untrustworthy simply because we fear any critical statements from us could make future access negotiations even more difficult. Nonetheless, having transparency and keeping a critical distance to industry informants remains vital if media production studies as a field is to retain its trustworthiness.

It is our hope that this article and its call for more transparency about methods will be heard and that it will not be interpreted as an attempt to discredit production studies or qualitative

research in general or as a vilification of industry practitioners as this is not our intention. Instead, we hope that it can start a more comprehensive and open conversation about how we can conduct media production studies with a high level of trustworthiness despite the many methodological challenges that we must handle.

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