6 things I learned from collecting qualitative interview data

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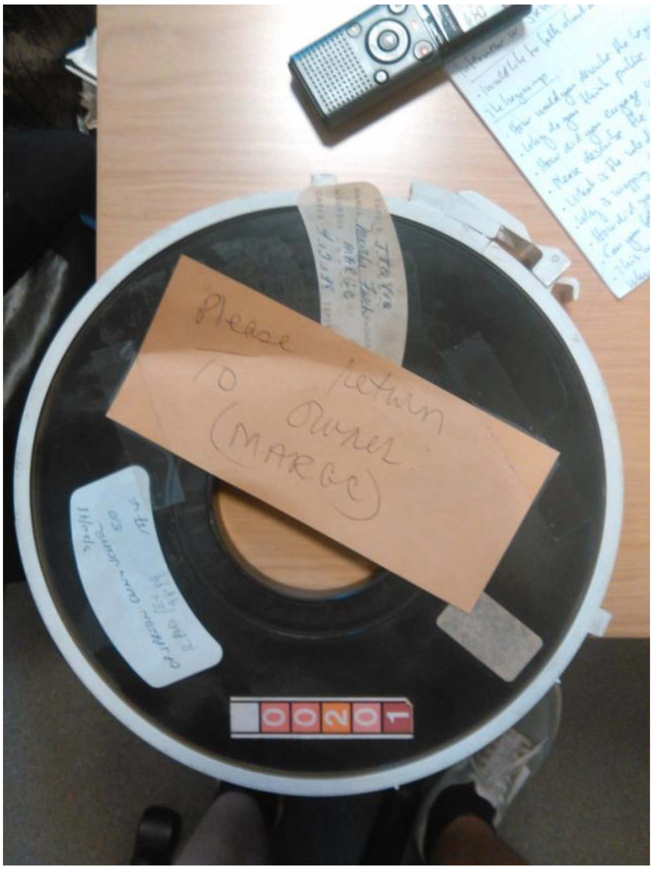

I like to think that this morning I recorded the last interview of my dissertation field research. Over the last two years I conducted roughly 70 semi-structured interviews in three different cities in three different countries. Besides the peculiarities of these different fields and the singularity of each of my interviewees, I think there are some things I learned that have a more general character. Hopefully they are of use for other early stage qualitative researchers:

1. Make contact early and broadly

Although it doesn't feels like that at the beginning your time in the field is limited and its unlikely that you will have that much time again to collect data in the field soon (think: teaching). It might me easy with the contacts you already have but generally it just takes some time to arrange your interviews. I recommend to use the first two weeks in the field full time to identify and contact interview partners. Don't get stuck and wait for some key contact persons to respond, but contact all kinds of potentially interesting persons in these two weeks. A good email template comes handy but it is crucial to personalize it and why it is exactly them and no one else you need so speak to to answer your research question. These two weeks of cold contacting can be frustrating but pay off in the long run and after one or two rounds of follow ups (see below: 3.)

2. Adjust your contacting strategy to your field

When looking for and reaching out to interview partners it is crucial to think about their preferred means of communication. In my case I was looking for generally technology-friendly people in government, administration, civil society and the private sector. In all of my fields it was relatively easy to identify who I should speak to, however it turned out to be particularly tricky to get their email addresses. I therefore started to contact people via Twitter and simply asked them for their email addresses. I usually got them or just started texting with them on Twitter right away to arrange an interview.

3. Keep track of your contact histories

The most important tool I created for each of my field episodes is a spreadsheet to keep track of my contacts. In this spreadsheet I collected all the names that I found in media reports, that I got referred to in other interviews, or that I found at any other places (mainly on the Internet).

These are the metadata fields that I used to describe my contacts:

- Interview date (to be inserted after arranging the interview)
- Last name
- First name
- Organization
- Position
- Comments (used to note the date of initial contact and eventually dates of follow ups)
- Status (contacted, interview arranged, interview conducted)
- Audio quality (good, medium, poor)
- Audio duration
- Transcription (yes, partially, no)

I also used a color scheme for the individual rows in my spreadsheet:

- Green for contacts that I have already interviewed
- Orange for contacts that I have contacted but haven't got a definite response yet
- Red for contacts that have declined an interview
- Yellow for contacts that are particularly interesting and I should get in touch with
- White for contacts that I haven't contacted yet

This color code particularly helped me with organizing my follow ups, as I only had to look at the orange rows and check the date at which I reached out to them for the last time. If it was more than ten days I would write a follow up mail. I would say in average I got a 50% response rate on these follow up mails.

4. Have your outline as a backup but prepare for every interview

During my first interviews I relied heavily on the standardized interview outline that I wrote during one of our methods classes in school. I thought that the closer I stick to this outline the better the comparability of my interviews will be. I now know: that wasn't too clever. Writing a standardized interview outline is a good training to learn what you are interested in before you enter the field. However as the interview partners you meet are so different, you necessarily have to "go with the flow" of every interview and adapt to the issues, pace and tonality as you go along.

To guide them I brought handwritten notes to each of my interviews. Over the course of my data collection however I learned to distance myself more and more from these notes. During the last couple of interviews I didn't really look at them even once. However this "emancipation" from my notes was only possible because I prepared for every interview pretty meticulously in advance. I defined a specific research question for every interview, tailored to what I expected the interviewee would be able to tell me about, I went on LinkedIn to learn about the interviewees career, I read newspaper articles that reported on the interviewees and their projects and I scanned what they were talking about on Twitter.

5. Watch out: There is an interview after the interview

I recorded almost all of my interviews with a simple voice recorder that I put on the table between me and my interview partner (it somehow feels more reliable than an App that could crash). At the point when I was basically done with my questions and ready to leave I usually thanked my interview partner for the time spent and turned off the recorder. However in many situations the interviewees said some of the most interesting things right after I stopped recording. I guess the psychology of this is something along the lines that some ideas only surface when the curtain of the "official" interview has fallen. When I figured out that there is more interesting talk to come I either asked the interview partner if I could turn the recorder back on, or I just took notes by hand which I then added to the final interview transcript. Whatever you do, be aware that there might be an interview after the interview.

6. There is a sociomateriality of personal interviews

Although many people I speak to prefer telephone interviews (mainly to save time), I prefer to meet my interview partners in person. On the one hand this gives you a nice excuse to leave the office from time to time and on the other hand I find it easier to bond with interviewees when there is not only verbal, but non-verbal communication at play as well. A significant and oftentimes overlooked aspect of face to face interviews is that it allows me to include not only the place where the interview is conducted but also the environment into my data collection. In one of my cases for example I visited a lecturer at a university in NYC. During our discussion about the history of geospatial data he suddenly leaves the room, goes to his personal archive and comes back with a magnetic tape from the 80s which we go on to discuss for the next 15 minutes or so. The inclusion of this artifact in my interview helped me to understand the impact that digitization had on the practices of handling geospatial data. This reflection would probably not have happened during a phone interview.