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Notes from the Field

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Before Louis Theroux's show, outside the State Theatre in Sydney (photo by F. Miller)

It's a rare occasion when a large group of documentary enthusiasts, filmmakers, journalists, popular writers and academic researchers (including ethnographers) are brought together in the same room: an eclectic mix of people who share a common appreciation (or at least curiosity) for BBC2 journalist, broadcaster and writer Louis Theroux, who has built a solid reputation over the past twenty years for being a "catalyst of revelations" - a phrase Theroux has used to describe what he does.

As Theroux delves into the so-called strangest of people and places outside of mainstream life, in an attempt to elucidate something about the human experience, he finds that "the most inexplicable behaviour springs from very relatable impulses...

and making an emotional connection in unlikely places can enlarge perspectives, and make people more empathetic, tolerant and humane.” While enacting the role of “catalyst of revelations”, his work is perhaps less like investigative journalism and more akin to what ethnographic researchers would do. Theroux casts most of the ‘spotlight’ on the participants, their experiences, stories, contexts, cultural backgrounds and, in a subtle way, on the audience and their various reactions, both (il)logical and (counter)intuitive.

I write this piece as a ‘follow-up’ to an article which I authored for [The Conversation](#) in 2014, focusing on Theroux’s work as an exemplary form of increasing impact and reach of social research through popular documentaries, writing and broadcasting. The article highlighted the commonalities between social research and immersive journalism, such as “truth” seeking within multiple world-views, identities and empathic dialogue as experienced through the eyes and voices of people with different cultural backgrounds.

It is intriguing to observe the emerging parallels between Theroux’s style of immersive journalism becoming increasingly prominent with sold-out shows and screenings across Australia and the UK, and open ethnography. The term ‘open ethnography’ generally means the public communication of ethnographic research, but it can also refer to a trend towards transparent data collection and analysis, and the extent to which the ethnographic research is accessible to the public for providing feedback into developing a project concept before publication in peer-reviewed journals. As Denny and Sunderland note in their 2015 book [Handbook of Anthropology in Business](#):

Over the last few decades there have been challenges to the production of traditional ethnographic knowledge... Scholars concerned with the disquieting trend of ethnography becoming too insular, prosaic and academic have raised concerns and offered alternative approaches. Vulnerable ethnography (Behar, 1996), experimental ethnography (Wolf, 1992), public ethnography (Bailey, 2008), adaptive ethnography (Hine, 2000) and community-based ethnography (Stringer et al, 1997) are all part of a larger effort to explore an ethnography that speaks to non-specialists. These approaches signal a turn to a more experimental and open ethnography. An open ethnography can produce more relevant insights because it relies not on one person for the insights but a network of people (Denny & Sunderland, 2015: 652).

Following his early TV series, Theroux published some of his own field notes in his book *Call of the Weird* – the audiobook was personally read aloud by the author, switching accents and portraying several of the colourful informants. These notes were written during production of his documentaries in consultation with other key people across the films. He has additionally held numerous live Q&A sessions in

person and through social media around specific topics throughout the production process. Perhaps a key difference is that immersive journalism focuses on telling stories from the perspectives of different voices on an issue in context (and continuing that discussion in post-production), while open ethnography as previously described can potentially make accessible in-depth collection, coding and analysis of data from immersive fieldwork experience. For example, Dr Tricia Wang has experimented with [‘live fieldnoting’](#) using social media to share some of her field notes and visuals during both travel experiences and the research process, to integrate feedback from colleagues and contributors into the final product.

The immersive nature of the filmmaking process reflects a shared meaning or understanding (intersubjectivity) within what Theroux calls “professional-friendly” relationships he develops as a natural inquisitor (or in less journalistic terms: discourse prompter – ‘really...? meaning...?’) with his varied subjects. During the course of the filming and dialogue with participants, Theroux openly divulges his role, personal background and potential influence on their interactions and vice versa - their influence on his own personal search for meaning and identity. Much like an ethnographer, while keeping the lens on a particular topic, Theroux would simultaneously explore the subjective impact of his own biographical life experience on his studies of global subcultures and social movements.

Perhaps in a latent way, Theroux’s “revelatory” moments appear somewhere in the juxtapositions between his calm, gentle and somewhat naïve and socially awkward demeanour, the often controversial or unconventional personalities and their different perspectives, and the classic (but in today’s sound bite media context, rarely used) technique of a protracted silence after a key experience occurs. This acts as a subtle cue for provoking the audience’s varied interpretations and perhaps a shared space for pondering complex moral dilemmas and ethical judgements around what is recorded.

Last September I was fortunate enough to experience one of Theroux’s live talks in Sydney as part of his 2016 speaking tour of Australia. The show featured two hours’ worth of detailed and fascinating commentary, which merged together key moments and film clips from his career and personal life. Of particular note is the influence from his peripatetic youth and family life, including from his father Paul Theroux, a prolific award-winning travelogue and fiction writer. He also mentioned that longtime occasional collaborator Geoff O’Connor, a director he met when they both worked at TV Nation with Michael Moore, has had experience of ethnographic filming and training in cultural anthropology from Columbia University. As a close colleague specialising in “accessing difficult-to-reach subcultures living on the fringe of society”, O’Connor was a key influence on Theroux’s approach. Before collaborating with Theroux as director of the *Weird Weekends* episodes *Porn* and *Swingers*, as well as *Louis and the Brothel* and *The Most Hated Family in America*, O’Connor spent time with the Yanomami tribe in South America while producing his documentaries *At the Edge of Conquest: The Journey of Chief Wai-Wai* and *Amazon Journal*.

In his talk, Theroux explained the pre-production process of choosing a focus for a documentary by writing a non-exhaustive, semi-structured outline of the topic of interest, emphasising various angles to uncover while out in the 'field'. Initially equipped with two qualities common to some ethnographers – dispassion and curiosity – there is an attempt to bridge any cultural divides by developing an objective and balanced understanding of the topic, as told from the perspectives of key players as they live through the issue at hand.

Theroux's disarming nature and ability to get most people to 'open up' helps in building rapport with those interlocutors who could be construed as having extreme views or who could be seen as dangerous or eccentric. Many believe that this is an in-born trait, a gift or aura, however he acknowledges that having had a twenty-year apprenticeship and cross-cultural experience as a documentarian has given him a broader philosophical perspective and the mental resilience to diplomatically converse with difficult people within their situations.

He often joked about his natural social anxiety and when quizzed about whether his ability to 'play the nerd card' could be protecting him from being attacked, he despondently replied with "I do play the nerd card, I just wish I had some other cards..." and that sometimes being the harmless 'nerd' could inadvertently incite anger depending on the type of person he is spending time with. Theroux says that he believes the best question to ask people at the beginning of a relationship is always "How are you doing?" – a simple yet effective way to shift the focus to genuinely caring to learn about someone and what they are going through, regardless of social differences.

I also had the pleasure of meeting him personally after the show, and we discussed a topic that I have become interested in as a social researcher in information experiences: the issue of social media addiction and how this is experienced by today's youth especially. Before the show, randomly selected attendees were invited to suggest a future documentary topic and mine was chosen during the show as one for Theroux to consider. He commented that he would be interested in exploring the issue and similar addictive behaviours that could eventually debilitate the human ecology, or the relationship between humans and their natural, social and built environments.

As mentioned during his talk, these medical or therapeutic angles might signal some future directions for his documentaries. This is indicated further by his more recent documentaries about severe cases of alcohol dependency and rehab at a London Accident and Emergency department and another looking at patients in an Ohio mental institution, examining the grey area between being a convicted criminal and having a mental condition. Both films have had real social impact in terms of positively affecting some of the subjects, as in the case of one young man, Joe, who

recently reported being sober for one year since participating in the film.

Immersive journalism (as practiced by Theroux and others) has an aim that is similar to open ethnography, towards quality public awareness of topics through filmmaking and broadcasting. But it also aims to act as a springboard for in-depth research into various contemporary topics. For example, the BBC Radio 4 has popularised ethnographic research with its [Thinking Allowed podcast](#) – perhaps this trend has been partly inspired by Theroux’s gradual success with an original format that crosses a number of professional practice boundaries.

References

Denny, R. M. & Sunderland, P. L. (2015). *Handbook of Anthropology in Business*. Routledge, London.