CHAPTER 22

ADVANCED RESEARCH

The more complex the film, the more likely the subject is to alter and develop during the research period. Expect, therefore, a circular pattern of endeavor in which you are researching, rewriting your working hypothesis, and working on a changing proposal all at the same time. The object is seldom to develop a script, but to explore everything relevant so that one is fully prepared. Before using this chapter, you might want to review the fundamentals again in **Chapter 7: Research.**

RESEARCHING FOR INFORMATION

Quantitative and qualitative research are each categories of information you will seek in the field, library, or Internet. Each represents a different type of evidence that you will seek—either to support or to challenge the assertions participants make, or perhaps in support of claims you want your film to make.

Quantitative research means gathering data for anything you can count or measure. This might be facts and figures for populations, incomes, crime figures, percentages of people in a particular occupation, or the average age at marriage. Making valid numerical comparisons allows you to assert, for instance, that many accountants take early retirement, or to dismiss arguments for crime being an inherited trait. If birth complication figures rise after a county has dismissed all its midwives, but remain stable in those counties that retained their services, you can argue persuasively that midwives are useful and should be reinstated.

Your credibility always rests on information that can't be discredited. When you get a fact wrong, the whole fabric of your argument falls under suspicion, so check facts carefully and skeptically. When several credible figures are in circulation, use the least extreme. *Crosscheck* all important information using at least two authoritative sources: you'll be surprised how frequently "historical facts" have acquired respectability through exchange and repetition, which is the basis of prejudice. The Internet is replete with dubious facts, incorrect spellings, and wild assertions of all kinds.

Qualitative research involves asking broad questions about what cannot be quantified such as attitudes, aspects of character, motives, methods, goals, outlooks, presumed backgrounds, and so on. Much research for documentaries is of this nature, and involves making subjective judgments and using your intuition to look for patterns. As a safeguard, crosscheck attitudes or perceived outcomes, and pay careful attention to your teammates' differing impressions and reservations. The more closely you work with partners, the more you can double-check your ideas and

impressions against the life-experience of other reliable minds. You should even discreetly cross-check opinions and feelings among knowledgeable participants. If, for instance, you are doing a town hall story, and someone tells you in confidence that the mayor "is very authoritarian," certain questions should reflexively pop up in your mind:

- *What agenda might the teller have*? If you believed him and then found out later that the mayor fired him for incompetence, you'd look really dumb.
- *How reliable is the informant's source*?
- *Was this assessment made first-hand from dealings*?
- Or *is it hearsay* from, say, TV reporting that was itself recycled from newspaper articles?

It is human to be subjective, so expect everything and everyone (yourself included) to be biased. Prolong the conversation with your informant to flush out all the information you can. Tap his views on unrelated issues to see how perceptive and fair he seems across the board, and perhaps what his attitudes to authority are in general. Talk to other knowledgeable people, to see whether, without revealing the target of your interest, you can validate or invalidate something potentially crucial that you've been told.

To make the strongest possible case, qualitative research that you use in your film must be juxtaposed with the right kind of visual or testamentary evidence, which may endorse or question someone's assertion. The reason you build pictures of each participant's character is to help us know about that person's agenda, to expect certain ambivalences (say), and to know how to interpret what he or she feels about something. His attitudes may rest on prejudices held as truths, so you must sometimes check whether a generalization is supportable or ought to be exposed as a fallacy.

ARCHIVAL MATERIAL

Film you want may be in government, state, local, or private hands and is often very expensive. You shouldn't assume that material you saw on television is available for you to use. Much history is in the copyright of the company that shot it, or that bought it.

Rick Prelinger of the New York Prelinger Archives (https://archive.org/details/prelinger) says that when your film depends on archive footage, be sure that (a) what should exist, does exist, and (b) that you can use it for a payment your production can afford. Negotiate early—never, ever wait till later. Be sure to declare the media, markets, and rights territory correctly and in their entirety because you will be at a huge disadvantage if you try to amend them later. Clear any music rights if music is integral to the footage you want. Anticipate all the extras the library may charge (duplication, research, etc.). Be sure to order the duplication in a format that will integrate with your production's workflow. If your film depends on a lot of material from a number of archives, consider hiring experienced archival researchers whose expertise will save you time and money. Prelinger's article contains much further useful detail.

FAIR USE AND BEST PRACTICES

Just as you can make "fair use" of limited literary material in a publication that discusses or critiques someone else's writing, there is a *fair use doctrine* that can serve as an advisory for what you can and can't do with segments of screen material taken without seeking permission. It is "advisory" because it has yet to be tested in court. If you want to avoid becoming a test-case, check latest developments in these two websites. One is the Stanford Copyright and Fair

Use Center at http://fairuse.stanford.edu and the other is via Pat Aufderheide at The Center for Media & Social Impact, School of Communications, American University, http://cmsimpact.org. By the way, her *Documentary Film: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2007) is first-rate.

IN RELATION TO PARTICIPANTS

When you start research, you have little idea what your film will say or what part any individual might play in it. Be clear that you are talking with people to gain an understanding from those in the know, and that filming will emerge from what you learn over time. Be clear, too, that a documentary is a mosaic that comes together during editing, not the realization of a script. We shoot ten times more than we use, and this should remove people's fears that you want them to "perform." It also forewarns them that you may or may not use their contribution.

OBSERVATION AND ACCESS

Wherever possible, gain access through someone trusted by the individual or community. Being an unknown at a union meeting, for instance, can be extremely uncomfortable since your goals will be suspect. Be ready to explain yourself repeatedly in broad terms until everybody seems satisfied. Do be sociable and communicative, since this lowers tension. Do join in group activities if invited and be ready to make a fool of yourself as part of your entry test. Becoming accepted by a settled group can be a much longer process. In some European villages, for instance, a family can remain "newcomers" for two or three generations!

KEEPING NOTES

Usually it won't feel right to make audio or video recordings during your earliest research because it puts people on guard. If however you hang out with a local sports team, they will probably accept you and your aims over time. Better is to note key phrases and sayings that will jog your memory in relation to particular people. Afterwards, expand your notes to make them intelligible before your memory fades, and write out any important thoughts, impressions, and intuitions. These will be helpful when you want to pursue particular issues.

Exploratory writing is a vital structuring activity that enables you to develop your initial ideas. Do such interpretative writing alone, somewhere private, and not in sight of possible participants, who may grow uneasy about what you are cooking up. Should a court ever subpoena your notes, your lawyer will advise you to produce notes that people saw you writing, but may let you withhold speculative writing made in private.

OBSERVING CHARACTER

Wherever you must reveal character, and especially if yours is a character-driven film, you must incisively observe the main participants. This you will have to do in private, so you can summon up your memory-impressions and write candidly. The idea is not to make an exhaustive catalogue but to note down whatever is particular and telling, and to capture those fugitive impressions picked up by your intuition. Your aim is to make powerful thumbnail portraits of the main characters as a way of priming your camera operator. Most useful is a set of behaviors to capture on film.

Dramatists and psychologists have struggled over the millennia to create embracing charts of personality types and traits, so you might want to glance at a summation online[1] for ideas that appeal to you. Here are categories I use as my antenna seeks out the particular:

- **Physical**
  - *Environment*, chosen or unchosen (country, area, home, workplace, furniture, accessories, pictures, decor, anything incongruous, etc.).
  - *Appearance and condition* (gender, age, ethnicity, body type, clothing, social class, energy, strength, etc.).
  - *Quality of interactions* (with people, environment, animals, tools, materials, etc.).
  - *Mannerisms* (expressiveness, bodily confidence, communicativeness, repeated mannerism, etc.).
  - *Vocal characteristics* (vocal range, timbre, associations).
- **Psychological**
  - *Roles*, willing and unwilling (job, self-concept, perception of and by others, role conferred by family or workmates, etc.).
  - *Goals*, long-term and short-term (that he/she is trying to get, do, or accomplish are_____).
  - *Obstacles* (that blocked and impeded him/her),
    - Internal forces he/she is struggling with are_____.
    - External forces he/she is struggling with are_____.
  - *Major conflict* (main, prevailing collision of forces in this person, and the paradigm for everything else, is the struggle between_____ and_____).
  - *Attitudes* (confident or unconfident, active or reactive, honest or manipulative, knowing or gullible, self-dramatizing or self-concealing, optimistic or pessimistic, extroverted or introverted, trusting or distrusting, etc.).
  - *"Voice."* (How he or she acts on, or presents him- or herself to others. This may vary revealingly, according to the situation.)
  - *Development* (What does the person need to learn, become, attain? Will they do so, and in what time-frame?)
- **Ideological**
  - *Philosophy of life* (credo, why we are alive, what we are here for, etc.).
  - *Affiliations* (religious, social, or political beliefs underlying his/her actions).
  - *Spiritual outlook* (sense of kinship, religious, or other spiritual beliefs, etc.).
  - *Contradictions* (beliefs that you see contradict his/her actions).

These categories seek the rough edges, disparities, and contradictions that can make people so vital, unpredictable, and fascinating. For every quality you want to include in your film, note the evidence that persuaded you, since it won't exist onscreen unless you can pick it up during filming. You will work extensively with these qualities in the next chapter, **Chapter 23: Advanced Story Development and Proposal.**

OPEN QUESTIONS AND LEADING QUESTIONS

Most important while you research is to avoid *leading questions*. An example would be, "Do you think the mayor is authoritarian?" Instead ask *open questions* that give no hint of what you expect such as "What kind of person is the mayor?" One person may call him "principled, firm, and a little humorless" while another says he's "loyal to supporters, a bit austere, and not the best listener." A third thinks he's "a rough diamond" and "has done quite a bit of good for the town."

From these differing, subjective experiences comes a more rounded profile that is significant for what it omits: nobody says the mayor is corrupt, a bad manager, or unpopular.

When you want to test a controversial opinion, be sure to preface it with, "*Some people say that* the mayor runs a patronage setup, so what would you say to them?" "*The Nightly Sentinel's op-ed column said that* the mayor listens mostly to his wealthy business associates..." The italicized openings displace the opinion away from yourself, leaving you as the open-minded researcher trying to understand a spectrum of attitude, and seeking the listener's help. Never forget that enemies of your film will seize on any inaccuracy to discredit you and all your works.

TRUST

Documentarians have occasionally abused the trust placed in them by participants. A woman factory worker once spoke candidly and trustingly to a colleague's camera about sexual morals among her female coworkers. The (male) director apparently knew this was a risk but did not discuss it with her, and effectively gambled with her safety for the sake of a more sensational film. When the film went out over the air, her colleagues were so incensed that they beat her up. Usually nothing comparable is at risk, so there's no need to alarm participants by warning of all imaginable consequences, since this would scare most people away from filming at all.

When you are in doubt, however, take pains to secure "informed consent" (below). In the case of investigative filmmaking, the nature of the investigation itself should be fair warning for those of mature age and judgment.

Informed consent is the permission that a participant (or their guardian, if they are underage) gives you in writing after you duly warn them of foreseeable consequences. To those deserving of a fair warning, such as the youthful, immature, or those who are emotionally or intellectually unprepared, you explain the possible negative consequences of their contribution, which might include physical or legal danger, or damage to a person's reputation.

You will probably feel like a doctor advising patients about the benefits of an operation with its offsetting complications and consequences. Some people listen carefully, some over-react, and some may be inattentive or too unsophisticated to absorb the implications. Only if they have understood the relevant facts and risks can you consider using their material, and even then it may be wise to err on the side of caution.

In America during the 1970s, the Loud family consented to have their lives filmed (*An American Family*, Alan and Susan Raymond, USA, 1973, PBS 12 hour-long episodes). The exposure—first to the camera, and then to savage criticism in the press, which treated them as performers—placed the unfortunate family under intolerable pressure. Afterwards they claimed that Alan and Susan Raymond had not explained the consequences. Maybe so, but the open-ended nature of any such undertaking would make comprehensive explanation virtually impossible. Who could have foretold that Bill would leave Pat, or that Lance would come out of the closet?

THE CASE FOR SUBTERFUGE

In seeking (or not seeking) permission, outright subterfuge is sometimes justified. When someone has collaborated in the gassing of defenseless people, you are amply justified in using deception to get their testimony, as Claude Lanzmann did in *Shoah* (France, 1985, Figure 22-1). By presenting himself as a historian wanting to "restore the balance of truth" to the historical record, he got the unguarded testimony of a Nazi officer from Treblinka extermination camp and of a German guard at Chelmno, where Jews were killed in mobile gassing vans. In the light of what these men had

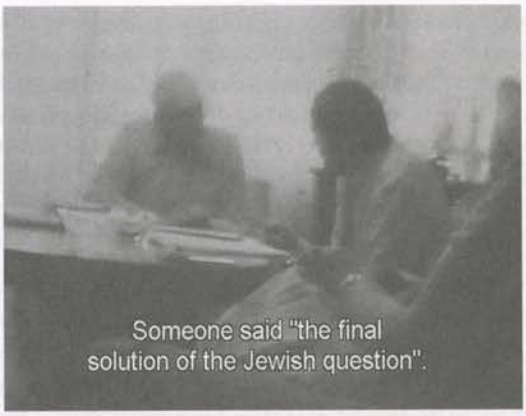

FIGURE 22-1

Secret video recording of Franz Schalling describing how Jews were systematically killed using van engine exhaust fumes.

done, few would have scruples about deceiving them. Such clarity is rare; usually the issues are not so black and white.

COMPROMISING YOURSELF

The loyalties and obligations that develop between yourself and your participants can lead to thickets of ethical dilemma. A single example: You are planning a film about the victims of a housing scam whom you get to know and like. You also gain the confidence of the perpetrators, wealthy property developers, who offer you hospitality. Refusing might tip them off to your disapproval of their practices, so you go out, eat an expensive dinner, and laugh at their jokes. When you next visit their victims, you feel compromised from sleeping with the enemy. Even if you let this be known, it would be unwise to confide more than a sketchy idea of what you learned, or you will turn into a double agent.

HANDS-ON LEARNING

Here you should build a foundation for advanced filming in **DP-4 Full Working Hypothesis**, and also perhaps take advantage of **DP-6 Advanced Proposal** to develop the many significant aspects that an audience expects of a professional-level documentary. By making use of **DP-2 Style and Content Questionnaire**, you can explore your intended material's meaning. You can also examine its potential for shooting and stylistic differences when you plan how to shoot.

NOTE

1. See Wikipedia under "Personality Psychology," and for more ideas follow any links that resonate to the person you have under study.