

Why Qualitative Research about Media Activism Could be Hard?

¿Por qué la investigación cualitativa sobre el activismo mediático puede ser difícil?

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Abstract:

This article discusses the challenges the researcher often encounter when they conduct qualitative research. The data were collected through in-depth interviews with a sample of researchers who did their qualitative research about media activism in Egypt between 2008 and 2018. In this context, media activism is a broad term to include new media, digital media and community media. Egypt was selected for this article as the case of the global south, where the research field is politically unstable, and the results may apply other countries of the global south. The article concludes that there are three main variables to determine the difficulty of completing a qualitative research: the identity of the researcher or the research team, the time of carrying out the research and the connections between the researcher and participants.

Keywords:

Media; Activism; Egypt; Qualitative Research; Interviews; Observation

Resumen:

Este artículo analiza los desafíos que el investigador a menudo encuentra cuando realiza una investigación cualitativa. Los datos fueron recogidos a través de entrevistas en profundidad con una muestra de investigadores que realizaron su investigación cualitativa sobre el activismo mediático en Egipto entre 2008 y 2018. En este contexto, el activismo mediático es un término amplio que incluye los nuevos medios, los medios digitales y los medios comunitarios. Egipto fue seleccionado para este artículo como un ejemplo del sur globalizado, donde el campo de investigación es políticamente inestable, y los resultados pueden aplicarse a otros países del sur global. El artículo concluye que hay tres variables principales para determinar la dificultad de completar una investigación cualitativa: la identidad del investigador o del equipo de investigación, el tiempo de realización de la investigación, y las conexiones entre el investigador y los participantes.

Palabras clave:

Medios de comunicación; Activismo; Egipto; Investigación cualitativa; Entrevistas; Observación

1. Introduction

With the emergence of Web 2.0 the media audience became content producers, this 'produsage', as called by Bruns (2007) has generated a variety of new media genres, such as citizen media, alternative media. Effectively, the new media holds an aspiration for social and political change through reporting, what is called *media activism*, which is organized 'grassroots' efforts aims at influencing the standing media practices and strategies (Carroll & Hackett, 2007). Media activism could be achieved through challenging the dominant culture, structure, or ruling class of a society (Lasar, 2007), by the dissemination of alternative content, creating media products to change the public opinion, creating culture spaces as forum those with marginalised or stigmatised identities, such as people with HIV (Gillett, 2003, p.610). Media activism could even reach the peak of foundation of media bodies different in structure and policies from the mainstream one.

Carroll and Hackett (2006) pointed to four form of 'media activism':

- 1) influencing content and practices of mainstream media (e.g. finding openings for oppositional voices, media monitoring, campaigns to change specific aspects of representation).
- 2) advocating reform of government policy/regulation of media in order to change the structure and policies of media themselves.
- 3) building independent, democratic and participatory media.
- 4) changing the relationship between audiences and media, by empowering audiences to be more critical of hegemonic media (e.g. media education and culture jamming.)

(Carroll & Hackett, 2006, p.88)

Although media activism, with all its types, has been a focus of researcher around the globe, the quantitative research are notably dominating their studies. Yet, more qualitative literature is required in order to grasp a deep understanding of changes in media. In fact, there is a huge body of literature on interviews and how they should be conducted and analyzed. Some of them address researching certain groups (like the literature about researching researchers, children, traumatized people, etc.) based on age, gender, profession, social or psychological conditions, but they have not yet considered research of media people (journalists, citizen journalists and the managers of the media outlets) as a group.

This article attempts to cover this gap by answering: why qualitative research are difficult, particularly when studying media activism? The article discusses the hardship of the application of qualitative research. Subsequently, the author outlines the variables that determine the difficulty or swiftness of qualitative research and explain each of them.

2. Methodology

Primarily, the methodology of defining the challenges of using qualitative research methods in studying media was in-depth interviews with a purposive sample of ten researchers, who have studied media activism in the period from 2008 and 2018. The sample included only who did use qualitative research methods, it also consists of academics from different genders, stages of their academic careers, ethnic and cultural backgrounds. In addition, the sample of researchers selected to participate as informants of this research vary in their academic affiliation; some work for local institutions, others work for international universities and a few are locals who work for foreign universities in Egypt and for international universities in the West. The researcher made the sample as diverse as possible in order to get multi-cultural perspective of the difficulties of researching media activism qualitatively. Three participants asked to keep their identity undercover. The logic behind requesting anonymity is keeping low profile, some of the participants regard the media activism as a 'sensitive' topic, especially that it has been associated with the political rebellion.

This article uses the case of Egypt, because it does share many social, cultural and political conditions which are common in the global south, what delimits the findings of the research. For instance, Egypt is a developing country, it had a grass-roots opposition in the 2005 until 2011. Plus, it witnessed a political uprising, and had several transformations from a police-state to a military state, from autocratic to totalitarian regime. Also, between the years 2008 and 2018, Egypt had different stages of being a relatively safe environment to a threatening one.

The people who are being studied in a qualitative research, are referred to as 'participants'. Granting power to interviewees started in the 1980s and 1990s, especially in critical research, where scholars "research with" rather "research on" their interviewees. Before that, the interviewer had all the power. The position of the interviewee could be reflected in the selection of researchers in relation to the words referring to them as "subjects", "respondents" or "informants".

It is hard to state the limitation of this research decisively, because in qualitative research, the researcher ultimately adapt and customize their research method to the community they are studying without prescribed practices. Nevertheless, the limitation of this research is the qualitative research in humanities and social sciences which is done in research environment similar to Egypt, the sample. This means, the findings here can be generalized to societies in the global south, at the time of growing tension between people and the political regime. Also, the cited experiences of the individuals of the sample are mostly applicable in the context of studying both media and social organizations.

3. Results: Why Qualitative Research about Media Activism is 'Hard'?

Qualitative research holds a lot of value and depth, the reason behind that is the same cause of its hardship, the personal communication. "Direct communication with the participants helps the researcher to understand the data deeper than quantitative research, where you only have answers without knowing the motivations of the

participant to choose these answers” (AbdelSalam, 2019). Clearly, the identification of participants allows the researcher to reconnect with the participant again when needed, what helps the researcher to collect and interpret the data accurately. Also, qualitative research bring new ideas, reveal unexpected facts that would have not been revealed without personal communication or observation. Moreover, in qualitative research the participants may be very welcoming to the researcher, and offer them further help. This is frequently happens when the academic study a less exposed group to the media or being studied academically, what was the case with Anne Alexander, a sociologist who has deeply studied the labor movements in Egypt and the employment of media in their organization.

Almost all the participants of this research agreed to describe the qualitative research as ‘hard’, except Rasha Abdulla, the former chair of the media department in the American University in Cairo, who thinks that the hardship of applying any research method depends solely on the research context. Abdulla has a reservation on “labelling an umbrella of research methods as ‘hard’ or ‘easy’. Abdulla thinks that the hardship of a research method depends on the context. Hence, “qualitative research could be ‘hard’ in some cases, where using qualitative research becomes ‘easier’ (Abdulla, 2019).

But the rest of the participants agreed that the application of in-depth interviews, focus groups and observation is usually challenging, because they involve personal communication. The researcher is expected to have an effective personal communication with participants, and get them to provide you with accurate and abundant data, or, in case of observation avoiding the “observer effect”, “researcher effects”, “reactivity” or the “Hawthorne effect”, which is the conception that individuals’ behavior may change if they know they are being studied. The next step is more challenging, the researcher codes, annotates and analyzes the data given by different participants, or he collected through his own observation. Also, the personal communication with participants in qualitative research requires a great connection with reality, thus, the circumstances of the field have significant influence of the researcher’s work, or the superficial understanding of the researcher to the culture/s of the field may yield to inaccurate data analysis.

And because activism, whether social or political, challenges a status quo, a standing situation or a common opinion, studying it has its shortcomings on the researcher. The consequences of researching media activism could be with the political regime, as in some contexts, the communication with activists to study their media could range between deportations, what already happened to multiple researchers who came to Egypt during 2011 and 2012 (Anonymous2, 2017), or murder, such as the case of Giulio Regini¹. In other cases, studying media activism could be the association of the researcher with the case of his research, especially when he studies a stigmatized group, such as the LGBTs, sex workers, fundamentalist groups or druggies.

Adding to that, a qualitative research may lead to negative impact of the mental health of the research. Precisely, if the object of study is some group of people at risk, then the

¹ Giulio Regini is an Italian PhD candidate in the University of Cambridge, who came to Egypt to collect data for his thesis. Regini disappeared in 2016, his corpse was found shortly after that left on the highway with signs of torture. The investigation on the case still ongoing between Cairo and Rome, as he allegedly was taken by the police to a detention centre where he has been physically abused.

frequent communication with them may affect the researcher' wellbeing. Effectively, many researchers would pause their studies to certain cases of activism due to the fear of a painful emotional experience. Definitely, digging deeper in an event phenomenon or community the researcher is affiliated with helps him in the data collection and analysis, but at the same time, it raises the concern of exporting your own experience to research (Anonymous1, 2019). Plus, the reconnection between the researcher and their case study may bring back a trauma or unpleasant experiences he lived, such as war, sexual harassments or mugging, all these affect their data collection (Anonymous3, 2019).

Aside from that, in qualitative research, the researcher is prone to cultural shocks. Spending too little time, or too much time in the field may raise the feelings of fascination, empathy, fear or rejection, what will leave an impact on the scholarship of the researcher. Thus, the researcher must plan to spend a fair amount of time in the field, visit different locations, and if there is a possibility to pay several visits throughout the time instead of one that should boost his emotional stability regarding the object of study. Sometimes, justifying the course of time the academic spends in the research field created a pressure on him. Anonymous3 spent several months in Egypt during 2015 in preparation to her doctoral thesis, her European university would ask her very often if she is in real need to stay in the research field, she says "I appreciate that the university staff were concerned about my personal safety, but then, I had to spend time writing to them my explanations and reasons for staying and overstaying" (Anonymous3, 2019).

Time is a big concern in qualitative research, because it takes time to understand the field, making the connection, arrange interviews, build enough trust and credibility in order to collect the data (AbdelSalam, 2019). In many cases, the biggest time consuming is participants' recruitment, what demands the researcher be patient and persistent, the matter may take more time to investigate the identity of the media activists, they may make themselves anonymous or not respond to online communication. Practically, becomes a drawback for the academic for conducting a qualitative research; "because if you are in a funded project, you are under the pressure of making things on time, and with interviewing and observing you never know how long your field work will last" (Gail, 2019). Time is challenge in qualitative research because it is also need for building strong relationships with the respondents. It may take more than what a researcher have planned, that what happened with David Faris when he tried to mingle with the high profile Egyptian bloggers and studying their cyber activism:

"it took months to win any credibility at all in the tight social world of the elite, and it was only after repeated calls, emails and meeting that I was able to gain the trust of any at all"

(Faris, 2011, p.20)

At some cases, the researcher may need to access the research field in a short notice, and therefore lacks the time for preparation, this happens in the studying the media in the war, natural catastrophes and times of change.

Furthermore, the amplification of the media domain and the emergence of digital subcultures makes sampling itself a challenge

“The media domain has become too loose, what requires the researcher to set more criteria and study their influence on all these sampling criteria on findings. Also, this expansion of media types and the spread of digital media has created a difficulty in text decoding [when the media researcher is using the content analysis method], because the language is too local or inappropriate”

(Khamis, 2019)

Last, and not least, qualitative research could be less appreciated than the quantitative one, especially those with a large number of participants. For instance, in Egypt, the committee for academic promotion will appreciate more a quantitative research, especially if the number of respondents are impressively high. Meanwhile, a qualitative research with a small number of participants will not be extremely valued by the panel, regardless of its depth” (AbdelSalam, 2019). Such underestimation of qualitative research, in some academic domain, is unexplained, because “unlike the common thinking, qualitative research are more difficult than quantitative research” (Khamis, 2019). In addition, some academic journals would exclusively admit the quantitative research for publishing, such as the *Mass Communication Quarterly*. Some even go further and specify the research methods and tools they accept.

4. Discussion: The Factors that Determine the Hardship of a Qualitative Research

Basically, all the mentioned challenges of conducting a qualitative research, precisely in the media discipline, stem from three variables. Assessing the following factors could reduce the difficulties of qualitative research significantly, these variables are:

4.1. Researcher Identity

This indicates the race, gender, age and affiliation of the researcher; it is not about his self-identification or the way he presents himself verbally and visually to the participants, but how what identity the participant give to him. Before all, the identity of the researcher as an academic should be clear in participants' minds. The interviewees and the community members that are being observed usually do not see the difference between the academia and media, the journalist and the researcher. The unexplained difference between the objective of a journalist to get the most 'interesting' or 'odd' part of the story, and the goal of the researcher to just get the facts may breed the researcher effect, because the participants would only show the best part of their work. Therefore, at the start of an interview, a focus group or observation, the researcher must explain his role, clarify that he is not a journalist and ensure that knowing all positive and negative sides will be for data analysis and would not result in a misrepresentation of the sample, especially that academic works are often circulated in closed circles. Yet, the confusion of between a media interview and an academic one may serve the qualitative research; it may encourage the participant to share much data with the researcher. For instance, workers on strike, for example, would often express a strong desire to put across the

case for why they were taking action, and frustration at the lack of interest from the media. Thus, they voiced all what they wanted to be heard with the researcher (Alexander, 2019).

Generally, having things in common with the participants would be an advantage. Also, being on the same age group may facilitate the qualitative research, not only that the researcher would be able to decode the language of participants more than if he is considerably younger or older than them, but also he would have the same sub-culture and therefore becomes able to collect the data effectively. For instance, Anonymous3 is a young female researcher who is starting a study to the influence of ICTs on the common sense of beauty, she says:

“for sure observing a Facebook group about taking care of the curly hair would be an easy task for me, because I can understand the posts, the comments, jokes and everything going on. I can observe and analyze the content in a distinctive way because I am a young female hair-curler and I do not think the task would have been as easy as it is if I were not [a young female with curly hair]”

(Anonymous3, 2019)

In fact, being the same gender of participant can work for the good of the researcher in some cases, in others, it will not. For instance, if a female researcher is investigating media activism for women's beauty or hygiene, if you are a female, then qualitative research will be easier, not only that participants would open up for you, but also you will be able to interpret the data they provide you with. In other cases, if you are a female researcher, you might not be able to access male-only online communities or interpret their subculture, not even mentioning interviewing members (Khamis, 2019). Even in the subjects that are not very gender-related, being of the same gender could be helpful. For instance, in many cultures, a woman researcher can go to interview women in their homes which would have been impossible for a male colleague. Also, a woman researcher is able to sometimes access the private spaces of women's lives created a very different kind of atmosphere for the interview, one which was more relaxed (Alexander, 2019).

Also, the race is a factor that determines the attitudes of many participants to the researcher, especially if the research field is a post-colonial country. The point here is not being a national of the former colonial, but being a 'White'. The race here is associated with the superiority-inferiority complexes implanted in people's minds during the colonial era. Radsch (2016) cites an incident that happened with her while studying blogs in Egypt during 2008; as she was asking a blogger why he does not publish posts in English to share his content with Western audiences, the participant replied with promises of getting some friend to help him translating the content in a tone that reveals he takes Radsch's question as a request rather than an inquiry. But the participants' focus on the racial identity of the researcher will be shifted if he speaks their language or knows their city extremely well, at this point, they will start to make assumptions that he is not fully a foreigner. For instance, Anne Alexander is a British researcher who speaks fluent Arabic, what made the interviewees in her research frequently assume she was half Egyptian or married to an Egyptian, which is not true.

4.2. *The connection between the researcher and participants*

The way these connections were built; the medium of first communication between them, was it the internet or face to face, the location of their first introduction, was it a domain of interest for the participant (such as a protest, a parade or a conference) or just a public place, the tone the researcher used with the participant at first (was it formal or casual) and who introduced the researcher to the participant. In fact, we should not set rules for setting connections between the researchers and the people he is studying, but the insistence of many academics to arrange their research 'formally' makes things harder for them. Simply put, the best thing to approach the research participants and communicate with them is adapting all rules to the culture of participants, which means considering the way they communicate in real life and set plans accordingly. For instance, in the Egyptian culture, media activists like everyone do not use formal language often, and almost never speak with a person in the standard Arabic (the formal version of the Arabic language), thus, emailing an interview request in the unspoken language would be odd.

Definitely using the same language of participants helps to far extend in building connections.

“Arabic was a way of establishing a degree of intellectual commitment to Egypt - people were well aware of the time and effort it takes to learn another language... showing that you have made the effort to acquire skills to talk to people in their own language can be a way to indicate that your encounter with the country and its people is based on the exchange of knowledge and experiences, not just a one-way process of extracting valuable information”

(Alexander, 2019)

At this point, we may assume that speaking the language of the participant would facilitate the connection between the researcher and the participants, and prevent miscommunication, but this is not always the case.

“Speaking the language is not the thing, speaking the culture is! I mean, there are many researchers, like me, who study the Arab region and are Arabic speakers, but what kind of Arabic do they speak? The standard classic Arabic? The dialect of the country where their language school was?.. I mean, speaking the language may continue to make you a foreigner, may even emphasize your identity as a foreigner, as long as it is not the language of the participants.”

(Gail, 2019)

In some occasions, where your research field is a politically-oppressive environment, using the wrong tone will have worse consequences; because sending a formal request to an individual, seeking an interview or a consent for observation will raise his doubts about your identity, the reason of your interest in speaking with him and how will you use the information they will provide. Here, the participant becomes concerned with his

personal safety, as the perception of your connection request is ‘I am someone whom you do not know asking you to answer all my questions’. Hence, clarity and evidence are key in approaching the targeted participants in the societies which lack freedom. A good practice when researching unfree communities or people at risk is being identifiable, for example, using hyperlinks for the researcher’s academic profile on the website of his institution, and checking what appears about him when his name is typed in the localized Google of the country of his research.

The connection with individuals and groups should happen through the media they are using most of the time. For instance, imagine you are studying a local community in some village, where they used digital media for the sake of their activism in a certain cause. In this scenario you are very likely to imitate contact with them online, it is true that they will see your message and very likely respond to it, but how long have they been using the internet for hooking with people? Certainly the email or social media are not the primary communication medium for these community members. Therefore, it will be more effective to visit them in their location, meet them in person, introduce yourself, and spend time with them and to request the interviews or the observation opportunity.

Having common friends with the participants eliminates the difficulty of the first connection, what proved effective with Faris (2011) who got himself introduced to many Egyptian bloggers community by the prominent blogger Hossam ElHamalawy. Also, the snowballing tactic was described as effective by all the participant academics in this research, this is where you connect with someone and he introduces you to another individual who becomes a participant in your research too, then he does the same and connects you with the next participant..etc. Nevertheless, sometimes the researcher does not even have the first contact to proceed with. Radsch (2016) proposes her personal experience in studying the Egyptian blogging and the Muslim Brotherhood digital media between 2008 and 2011, affirming that being in the virtual and physical spaces where participants are is an effective way of recruiting them to an academic study.

“I attended press conferences, workshops and looked for invitations to events and basically tagged along whenever possible. I sought to be involved with this very loosely defined community... My embeddedness in the blogger community also gave me Access to unpublicized events and prompted others to help me gain Access to potential participants”

(Radsch, 2016, p.78)

Certainly, good preparation for a qualitative research involves, at least, one visit to the field before data collection, for accessibility checking and ensuring the final selection of samples.

4.3. The circumstances of the research field at the time of studying

Qualitative research becomes hard when participants are not very helpful, either because they are skeptical about the researcher, are not motivated to spend time with him, fearful of speaking about specific subjects or just tired of speaking on the subject if it has been

over studied. For example, after 2008, the cyber dissidence in Egypt was a trending topic for researchers, especially in the Scandinavian countries, where several grants were allocated for that (Rasdasch, 2016). Ever since, speaking to the prominent media activists became a difficult task; Faris (2011) writes how he would spend hours in coffee shops waiting for participants who do not show up, and some of them would not answer his calls nor emails, what he describes as a 'media fatigue', where the participants assumed he is going to pose the same questions they have been asked by every media outlets, and therefore lost their motivation to come. This media fatigue seemed to last in 2011, when Anonymous1 interviewed a number of Egyptian social media figures, to find that they were brief in their answers, also because of the huge media and academic interest in their work and being interviewed for so many times. In both examples, the amount of the collected data has been a challenge for the researchers and required them to double their efforts (Anonymous1, 2019).

Also, a good timing will facilitate the research, for example when a researcher observes an emerging phenomenon, or media project or any experiments, in that case, the participants' enthusiasm to their project will serve the researcher's plans and be translated in a good set of data and personal connections (see for example Hefny, 2017). Notable, the empowerment of the studied group and their activism has a notable influence on the amount of data they provide, what was the case with Anonymous1 in studying the cyber activism in Egypt during 2010 and 2013:

"I can see and sense the difference in the different stages.. The responses varied clearly in 2013, becoming more brief and full of disappointment, unlike in 2010 and 2011"

(Anonymous1, 2019)

The timing of the research determines the methods of qualitative research, because under some circumstances, using some techniques becomes endangering. Abdulla (2019) explains that after 2013, she had to stay away from using the research methods that requires direct communication with people, as an atmosphere of fear had been dominating different circles. Alternatively, Abdulla is using qualitative research methods such as content analysis, discourse analysis and digital ethnography. Gail (2019) shares the same opinion, she agrees that at the time being it is hard and risky to use in-depth interviews or observation for academic research about Egypt. Gail compares her research in 2009 and 2010 to the work of one of her PhD students, who has been trying hard to conduct interviews in Egypt in 2019, but almost no responses to his requests.

The pressing need to study the activism in unstable circumstances is a cause of the hardship of qualitative research about media activism, as the research needs to do all their work of building connections, gaining credibility and collecting data without delay.

A significant risk of conducting qualitative research about media activism in a politically- changing environment is that the subjects and objects of studying may not exist in the future. Waiting for things in the research field to settle down should not be an option. For instance, looking at the work of Hefny (2017) about citizen media organizations in Egypt during 2011, 2012 and 2013 we find that all the cases she studied are gone, either were shut down by the authorities, or their co-founder decided

to suspend their work. Plus, many of the participants in Hefny's research have been behind bars or are on the run. In fact, the researcher should be aware that the timing of conducting their research could hold an intense emotional experience for him.

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