Introduction to the Special Issue on the Use of Visual Methods in Social Research

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1.1 This is a Special Issue on the use of Visual Methods in Social Research and aims to showcase both the ability of *Sociological Research Online* to host complex presentational forms with little by way of restriction, but also some of the many ways that visual methods and visual media can be utilised and embedded within the research process *as well as* the reporting phase. This is the first ever Special Edition of *Sociological Research Online*. It runs with no other general articles and visual based articles are the only primary content. The next edition of the journal will further support this effort to encourage visual methods and embedded reporting by hosting a Special Section (the normal means of thematic presentation in the journal) in addition to general articles, on Visualising the Changing Landscape of Work and Labour. The Special Section will be guest edited by Phillip Mizen and Carol Wolkowitz.

1.2 When we first became editors of *Sociological Research Online* in March 2009 we were proud to be heading up a prestigious social science journal that was one of the oldest (first edition in March 1996) and best established of the genre. From the outset the online format and its semi-open publication arrangement has made the journal accessible to nearly everyone that has access to the internet and its early style was innovative and genuinely challenging to the print media as it then was. Today, much has moved on in both in the world of publishing and in the world of research. In publishing, most print journals today also have a strong online presence to compliment their printed versions and in the world of research the use of video, sound, interactive, and still images are increasingly utilised to enhance the research process from beginning to end. *Sociological Research Online* has, long before the print media tried to combine formats, always been able to offer authors the chance to present their research in innovative formats. This has included embedded sound, embedded video and extensive use of images. An online journal has fewer concerns than traditional journals about word length (quality and succinctness apart), as these do not impinge on its costs. Similarly, being in an electronic format, SRO has always had the freedom to encourage extensive colour imagery and other forms of presentation such as embedded links that enabled the relevant browsing of the internet at the click of a mouse. Print journals – even today – are relatively hamstrung by some of these constraints and the online versions of the printed version – that enable extra presentational – advantages remain essentially 'poor cousins' to the print version. The opportunities for exciting, innovative and *complete* presentation of research in the social sciences in a well respected and established mainstream journal therefore remain, even today, relatively limited. *Sociological Research Online* not only fulfils this role but is seeking to further establish its position as a leader both in presentational matters and in substantive terms.

1.3 Although the journal has long had the facility to provide innovative ways of presenting research articles that the print media did not, comparatively few authors over the years have taken advantage of this (the exception being when Susan Halford and Caroline Knowles' collated key papers from the International Visual Sociology conferences of 2004 and 2005 to form a Special Section in Vol. 10, Issue 1). In some respects this is because the written word remains pre-eminent in the hierarchy of what counts for credible academic output and this means that many researchers that have used video, images, audio and e.g. online materials have 'gate-kept' themselves when writing up their research – even when submitting to *Sociological Research Online*. Even journals dedicated to visual research suffer from having mostly written word articles submitted and accepted. There are a number of reasons for this – some relate to ethics and indeed we have had to address a number of ethical issues in this special issue whilst others relate variously to authors themselves not always 'seeing' or envisaging *how* to write or produce output with embedded materials as part and parcel of the writing process rather than just providing descriptive enhancement similar to the use of quotations.

1.4 The aim of this edition then was not simply to showcase the way the journal was able to provide virtual space for video and other imagery as though this was all that was being facilitated. In substantive terms the aim was also to show just some of the ways that visual material could be used in a progressive way to encourage more use of visual methods in the social science and to demonstrate how that it could then

be related to the outside world. The further aim therefore was to help push the boundaries within the *general* social science community to be more aware of visual research approaches, to expose that community to the rich diversity and methodological innovation in that area and thus encourage a more inclusive and expansive approach to research in future. Of course, in doing this we hope that *Sociological Research Online* will again establish itself as the pre-eminent space to publish visual material for a mainstream social science audience.

1.5 There are many issues related to the use of visual methods and materials and this special issue inevitably only captures some of them. What is captured however is informative and in some cases perhaps even path-breaking for their exposure to the wider social science community. Eldin Fahmy and Simon Pemberton demonstrate the use of 'video testimony' for those experiencing poverty and social exclusion in rural Herefordshire. The testimonies powerfully portray how the issues encountered are both one and the same time experienced individually within structures that contribute to their marginalisation. The further aim of the paper – to show the potential of video data for social research practice in its own right and as a vehicle for giving voice to marginalised groups within wider public debates and policy development is laudably achieved. Claudia Mitchell and Naydene de Lange combine both still and moving images in an article that shows how they utilised HIV related images in the research process to engage participants in dialogue around both the meaning and stigma attached to HIV. They also show how this process empowered the participants to understand how they too might use similar images to engage communities in the fight to reduce HIV-stigma and thus its spread.

1.6 In *Capturing Christmas* Stewart Muir and Jennifer Mason show the nuanced value of participant-produced digital footage of shared family experience (collected as part of a larger project exploring family backgrounds and family traditions). Captured is not just a variety of data forms (e.g. 'acting' and 'performance' for the camera or researchers and also scenes of relative family chaos that are less contrived but equally meaningful) but also potentially invasive aspects of private lives that raise important ethical issues for researchers intent on capturing greater depth (of individual and family/community existence and interaction) and showing it to a wider public. Luc Pauwels takes us on a slightly different path and shows us how the 'visual essay' - the use of visual modes to impart knowledge, encourage thinking, stimulate debate and assist in visualising expression and (general but also theoretical) thought is also part of the way that the visual is making itself part and parcel of the developing social sciences. A useful history, overview and demonstration of its burgeoning potential are fruitfully provided to its reader/viewer. Sarah Pink and Kerstin Leder Mackley challenge us to understand more fully the use of video-ethnography to capture the hidden, sometimes prosaic aspects of the everyday world – even that related to sensory and aesthetic experience. By way of method they suggest: '... such an approach has wider applicability in offering a basis for understanding the home as a material, sensory, social and experiential environment from which studies that have as their objectives an understanding of other dimensions of everyday domestic life might depart'. In this sense they allow us to view aspects of the home we might have previously missed and suggest a starting point for analysis new to many in the social sciences that none-the-less is not simply methodological musing but is shown to have potential for policy analysis of real world issues (in this case energy consumption).

1.7 Stephen Spencer in *Looking for Africaville* provides a contrasting 'raw sensory' experience with visuals and audio that is of a presentational quality that reflects the available resources and research context but arguably adds value in unexpected ways to how the narratives embedded in the visuals and text unravel. Rather than arguing for (as do some visual researchers) the visual to be present in its own right, for subordination of it to the text to be denied, the author has sought to allow the representational forms present to be complimentary and to run 'parallel' to produce, overall, a synthesised outcome that lends greater value to the narrative being told – that of contested space, place, identity and conceptual reconstruction through video ethnography among a now displaced group. Many of the articles offer helpful insight into the various ethical issues which visual research confronts.

1.8 Rose Wiles, Amanda Coffey, Judy Robison and Jon Prosser provide us with a direct exploration and consideration of both the developing (increasingly constrained) ethics milieu that visual researchers have to operate within; report on how visual researchers at various stages of their careers are themselves engaging with and 'managing' this context; and what the consequences are for the future of visual research in the social sciences in the UK. Although few researchers yet felt the increasingly bureaucratised weight of ethics committees – even those that do not fully understand the method/s to yet be unreasonably overbearing, it is clear that some of the issues (ie when/whether to anonymise those that appear in video data and the nature of 'ownership' of visual data involving people and their things) have some distance yet to run (both within the minds of researchers and the imposed regulations/codes of practice of ethics committees) and will exercise the field for some time to come. Finally, Chris Yuill in his *The North Laine: A Visual Essay*, we find an example of a detailed and theorised case study of a space/place that is in reality a heady mix of historically and contemporaneously rich cultural, political, economic, sensory and structural antecedents. The case study, through theoretical application, reflection and a blending of visual imagery demonstrates how these antecedents have worked their way into visual representations of everyday life in Brighton's North Laine.

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