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'Lights... action... grounded theory': developing an understanding for the management of film production

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Abstract

Grounded Theory (GT) provides an ideal tool for analysis and theoretical development, and so is used here to study the Australian Film Industry. The goal of this study is to explicate management outcomes from the perspective of a film producer managing a film production. This paper firstly explains the value and the practicality of using GT for this type of study, it then provides a practical understanding of how the method can be used.

Keywords

Grounded Theory, Film Industry, Management

Disciplines

Business | Social and Behavioral Sciences

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'Lights... Action... Grounded Theory':

Developing an understanding
for the management of film
production.

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Grounded Theory (GT) provides an ideal tool for analysis and theoretical development, and so is used here to study the Australian Film Industry. The goal of this study is to explicate management outcomes from the perspective of a film producer managing a film production. This paper firstly explains the value and the practicality of using GT for this type of study, it then provides a practical understanding of how the method can be used.

People who manage films in the Australian Film Industry face challenges far in excess of most other managers in more conventional modes of business. There are many aspects of the work they undertake that collectively assemble to make their task a very difficult one. Some of the attributes that characterise these additional tensions are: long hours; irregular work; poor pay; changing environments and conditions; high pressure and short deadlines; large and tightly controlled budgets; creative, volatile and passionate personalities, and more. As one Producer put it:

There's probably few companies that are working in such an erratic environment ... I would say the most challenging part is people, and given that you are in an environment which is full of flux and change, and you're coming from nothing ... there's a lot of stresses, there's a lot of tensions, there's a lot of demands, there's a lot of responsibilities on all the people.¹

I began my PhD early last year with a desire to discover how managers in the Australian Film Industry were successful in film production, and how that may compare to other spheres of management. I was interested to learn two things – what lessons managers of film production may have for managers in the world around them, and what management, in general, may have to share with film producers to improve their plight, and render their world, if not more efficient, less stressful. My journey toward this discovery has been tumultuous with many twists and turns, and it was not until I discovered the merits of Grounded Theory, that it all seemed to come together, and I was able, at last, to make some real head-way.

Grounded Theory (GT) 'is an inductive, theory discovery methodology that allows the researcher to develop a theoretical account of the general features of a topic while simultaneously grounding the account in empirical observations or data.'² GT provides a detailed, rigorous and systematic method of qualitative analysis, which has the advantage of reserving the need for the researcher to conceive preliminary hypotheses, thus providing greater freedom to explore the research area and allow issues to emerge.³⁻⁷

Practitioners who adopt Grounded Theory are simply employing a methodology which relies on 'a set of integrated conceptual hypotheses systematically generated to produce an inductive theory about a substantive area.'⁸ GT provides a mix of structure and flexibility, with clear and unambiguous guidelines. Glaser⁸ sees it as being comprehensive, yet perfectly straightforward: 'Following the full suite of GT procedures based on the constant comparative method, results in a smooth uninterrupted emergent analysis and the generation of a substantive or formal theory'.

Orthodox Grounded Theory will not provide accurate facts or factual description, rather the results, after analysis, are theoretically grounded conceptualisations of a basic social process, which explains the preponderance of behaviour in a substantive area of the research environment. As the analysis is abstract in time, place and people it lends itself to modification in light of new data.^{3,8}

GT is, fundamentally, the generation of theory from data. Glaser stresses that researchers who contemplate using this method must have a degree of 'theoretical sensitivity'.⁵ The researcher must be able to maintain an open mind with analytical distance, which is not clouded by predetermined ideas or *a priori* hypotheses, while maintaining a level of tolerance toward the unorthodox and uncertain environment GT forces upon them. In addition, the researcher must have strong conceptual skills, which enable the conversion of data into something meaningful. 'He/she must have the ability to conceptualize and organize, make abstract connections, visualize and think multivariately'.⁸

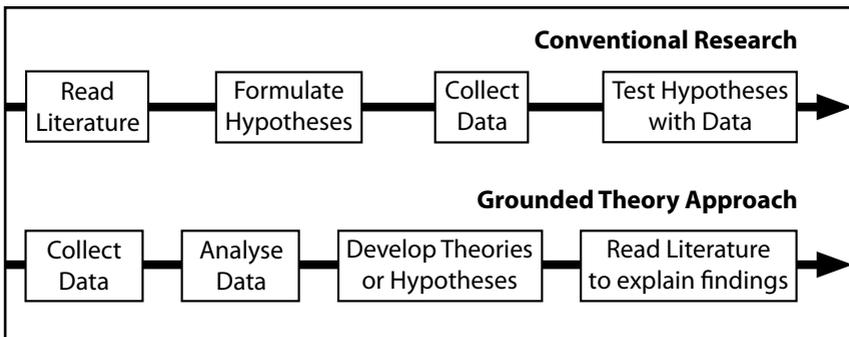


Figure 1. Comparison of Conventional Research Methods to Grounded Theory

GT takes a research approach, which is contrary to most of the more conventional research models (Figure 1). As Glaser says: 'The best way to do GT is to just do it'.¹⁰ Data collection, coding and analysis occur immediately, concurrently, and throughout. The process is not impeded by the development of research problems, theoretical understanding or literature review. Instead, the researcher is granted the freedom to enter the field and discover the main concerns of participants and analyse ways they resolve these problems. GT is founded on the conceptualisation of data through coding, using a method of constant comparison. Data, mainly in the form of transcripts, observations or literature, are fractured into conceptual codes, which during the process of comparison, combine to form meaningful categories, which then, through a process of abstraction, eventually become substantive theories or conceptual hypotheses.

Rigorous application of the GT method yields a set of categories – usually a core-category, coupled with some sub-categories – which ‘explain with the fewest possible concepts, and with the greatest possible scope, as much variation as possible in the behavior and problem under study.’⁵ When these hypotheses are located within the relevant literature pool, the final product demonstrates parsimony and theoretical totality.

As previously mentioned, the aim of GT is to discover theory: ‘grounded theorists want to know what is going on. They look at areas that have either never been studied before or those that are inundated with disparate theories.’⁹ The Australian Film Industry represents an excellent research opportunity. There is a distinct paucity in ‘management’ research in this area and consequently a scarcity of developed theories and literature, therefore the field represents an ideal target for this style of research, which allows the researcher to question ‘what is going on’ with an open mind.

After reading some initial how-to books on Grounded Theory,^{2,5-7,10,11,12} I decided to proceed with this method of analysis and interviewed two Film Producers. My questions, though not as open as Glaser suggests,⁸ provided me with three hours of excellent data, which I duly transcribed.

The Action Starts

After transcription, I began the process of open coding. GT uses three levels of coding, initially *open coding* is adopted, this is the stage where the raw data, in my case interview transcripts, are initially examined, and are coded through a process which fractures the interview into discrete threads of datum. These datum are eventually collated and accrue to form categories of similar phenomena. The process of open coding examines the data without any limitations in its scope, and without the application of any filters, thus all data are accepted and none are excluded, this allows the researcher to look for patterns which may lead to social processes which may be of eventual interest. As the categories begin to fill, those that are most dense become known as *core categories*.

As these core categories become apparent, the researcher switches to the second level of coding, known as *selective coding*. Selective coding allows the researcher to filter and code data which are determined to be more relevant to the emerging concepts. Therefore only the most pertinent passages of a transcript are used and coded, and to facilitate this, interview questions are continuously reformulated to encompass the new and more focused direction of the research.

The final stage of coding is known as *theoretical coding*. Theoretical coding occurs

when core categories have become saturated. *Saturation*, is both a peculiarity and a strength of GT. Unlike other methods of qualitative analysis which acquires rigour through multiple levels of confirmation or triangulation.¹³ GT builds an analytical case by constantly seeking new categories of evidence. Eventually, after a period of data collection, a point is reached where no new data result from additional data collection, this is the point of saturation. Theoretical coding examines these saturated categories and provides the researcher with analytical criteria which assists in the development of conceptual relationships between categories and their relevance to the literature.^{5,6} As the coding procedure before this phase worked to fracture the data and cluster them according to abstract similarity, *theoretical coding*, along with sorting, knits the fractured pieces back together again to conceptualise relationships between the hypotheses derived through open and selective coding. 'Theoretical codes give integrative scope, broad pictures and a new perspective. They help the analyst maintain the conceptual level in writing about concepts and their interrelations'⁸

To assist me with the process of open coding I used a software package called Nvivo.¹⁴ In accordance with Glaser and Strauss's advice,¹¹ I coded everything, regardless of its apparent value. Categories began to emerge, and as each piece of data appeared for coding, questions were asked of it to determine whether it would fit into an existing category or if it should form a new category,¹⁵ This is the initial stage of *constant comparison*,¹¹ and as categories start to accumulate and gain depth, the process of constant comparison forces the researcher to begin to reflect on the data, and to commence conceptualisation, usually through 'memos'. (Figure 2).

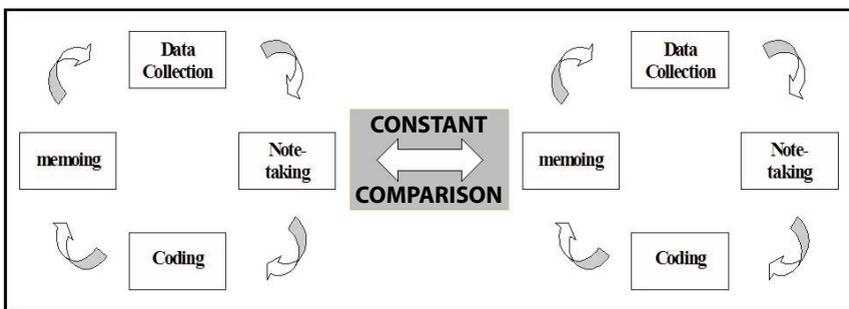


Figure 2. Constant Comparison

As Figure 2 suggests, the processes of data collection, note-taking, coding, and memoing, operate simultaneously, concurrent with the process of constant comparison. This process of open coding continues until core-categories emerge

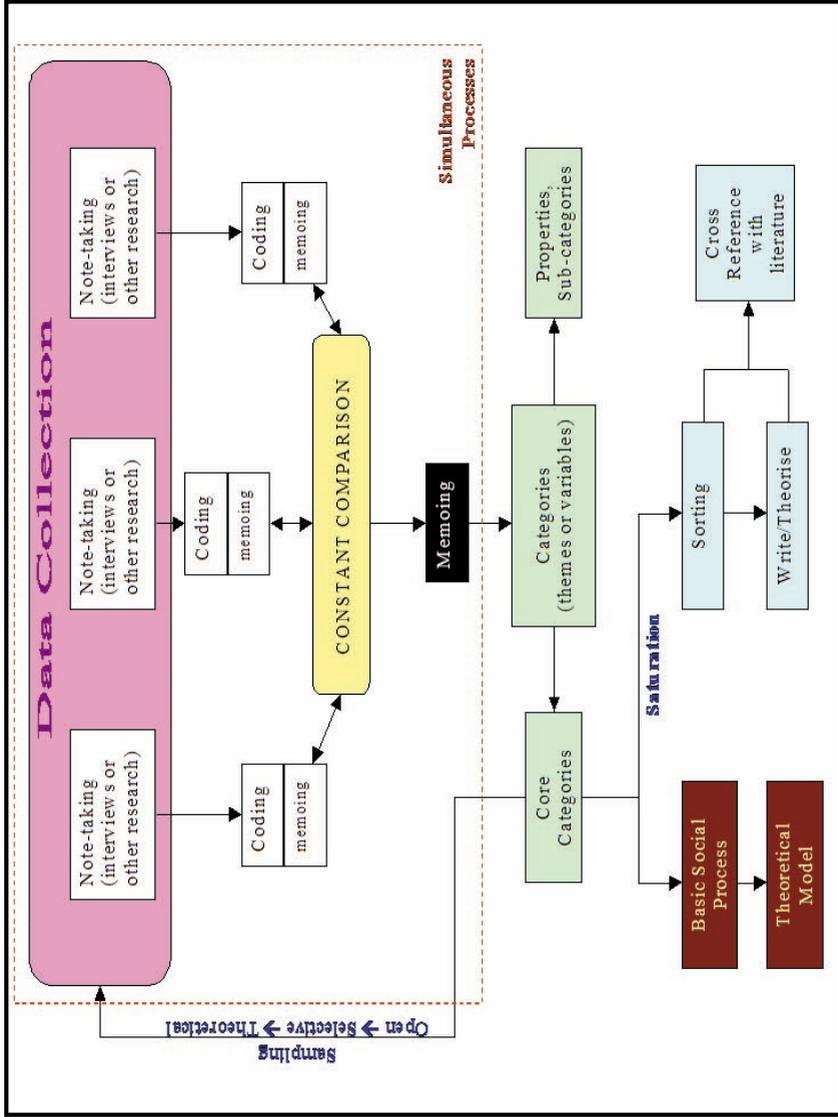


Figure 3. The Process of Grounded Theory (conceptualised summary from Martin and Taylor²)

from the data. In my case this happened relatively quickly, and now I am at the stage of applying selective coding, that is delimiting my inquiry of the data and looking for more specific information to code. Figure 3 describes the journey using GT.

The final result of research using GT as a method of qualitative analysis is a model depicting the Basic Social Process – a Basic Social Process (BSP) is the discovery of a human process that transcends the typical research boundary of ‘social unit’ by examining the social process occurring within that unit, subsequently studies revealing BSP’s are not grounded by their research context, but gain a degree of universality. Another outcome is a collection of clearly articulated and conceptualised categories, which once sorted and integrated with relevant literature, become substantial components in the writing up of the Thesis.

This section has discussed Grounded Theory and its use as an analytical tool for qualitative research. The next section will discuss some of the findings that have arisen through the use of Grounded Theory. These findings are based on the initial data analysis from the two interviews and show the core categories that have emerged through the process of open coding and constant comparison.

Categories Emerge: The Management of Film Production – A Basic Social Process

A film project begins with certain defining processes. The first stage – *Project Germination* – is a stage where the creative vision is conceived, having been derived from a viable script which may have been in development for some time, and where the end-state – a projected view of the final desired product – is defined. Without solid, well-conceived ideas at this stage, progress to more evolved processes is difficult or impossible. Usually the Director and Producer work very closely during this stage:

There’s two individuals on the film that are involved if not right from the beginning together, very close to very early in the beginning, ... and that’s the director and the producer, so there are two people that are going to really look after the production and know what the entire vision is, so when the producer starts working with that director and in terms they have to have a shared vision of what they’re creating and how they are going to create it... It’s like the director [and] the producer are a two-headed beast in a lot of decisions, clearly with different roles in many cases but at the same time they are working very closely together, often them

against the world, to help the film mature and that means collaboration on all sorts of levels.¹

A large part of this stage is the leveraging of the vision to raise finance; the Producer will take the vision and will sell it to various funding bodies to raise the necessary funds to start (not always complete) the film project. This stage feeds into two other concurrent processes: Project Creation and Financial Management, and while these processes tend, to some degree, to be ongoing, the bulk of the work is done in the initial stages.

Project Creation involves the establishment of management systems and the engaging of human resources. It is here that the vision is converted into something a little more tangible, planning takes place, people are hired and coordinated. *Financial Management* is the process of distributing and controlling funds.

The relationship of these two processes to that of *Germination*, is an essential one, neither of these processes can take place without a clear and well articulated vision, or without the funding that is a necessary outcome of *Germination*.

A Basic Social Process – Project Germination

The process of *Germination* begins with a Vision, usually crafted by the director, but sometimes the producer, and often both. Once the vision has been crafted a couple of things happen. Some before the production (pre-production), and some during production, there will also be residual effects flowing through to post-production.

During the germination process the producer has two roles:

Role as a Salesperson: Before the project can leave the ground, finance must be obtained. In an effort to raise this finance, it is the producer's role to solicit funding. A large part of this fund-raising process requires the relating of the vision to the various funding bodies.

Communications Medium: The Producer also plays a large part in communicating the vision to the cast and crew and ensuring the understanding of the vision by the cast and crew during casting and hiring and project planning.

A Basic Social Process – Project Creation

Once the initial phase is complete; a viable vision has been crafted, and funds are approved and control of them is handed over to the producer, the project can begin in earnest. The process of Project Creation begins, and while seemingly

linear, it is reasonably dynamic: Firstly production decisions are made, usually based on some creative or strategic criteria, in making decisions the producer draws on a repertoire of creative skills and experience. Decisions are then planned into the production schedule, during this sub-process, the producer will need a great deal of prior experience and knowledge – *this is a highly critical factor, often if the producer doesn't have sufficient knowledge or experience, they will buy this in, in the form of a co-producer or line producer:*

I think the thing about the producer is that there's a lot of skill groups, each of those groups have a whole range of different skills within them ... and certain producers excel in one or more of [them] but not necessarily all of them. ... There's the creative components to really understand the creative aspects – the story telling aspects, the second one would be production which is to really understand the whole mechanisms of production and how to make them work effectively, and the third one is the selling which is how to be able to sell a concept, an idea effectively to raise the money, and I think in broad groups of up to three requirements of the producer but not all producers share the same skill levels in each of them and can and do compliment them by other people who are better at other aspects of the [process].¹

Following the planning stage, people – cast and crew – are hired (sometimes these people are required as being contingent to the production, especially key actors and editors, etc), and initial attempts at coordination are made. In a well managed production, extra effort is made to ensure inter-team coherence and harmony, by holding extraordinary meetings, and building structures that encourage honest feedback:

During pre-production we have quite a few meetings and there will be small little meetings, - director with one department, director with another department - but we also hold general production meetings with whoever is involved at that stage of pre-production. And that also gives another opportunity for people to talk and express.¹

An important part of this creation stage is getting the right people and utilising them effectively. People will not only make or break a film, but will determine its creative appeal, its cost effectiveness and its timely completion.

A Basic Social Process – Project Facilitation

Project facilitation is the stage of the process which governs project efficiency and effectiveness. Key to this process is the Producer's ability to provide a nurturing

environment; an environment which fosters fruitful collaboration between and within teams, encourages honest and timely feedback, and ensures adequate enablers of communication such that the vision and subsequent directives are thoroughly propagated and understood by all.

Conclusion

This paper has described the application of a relatively new method of qualitative analysis – *Grounded Theory* – to an area of study – *the Australian Film Industry* – which is relatively untouched, as far as management research is concerned. GT is a method of scientific investigation, which provides the researcher with a great deal of flexibility, and allows uninhibited discovery, letting the empirical findings emerge on their own terms, and subsequently enabling the researcher to develop theoretical insight which is both rigorous and universal.

Using GT in a study of Film Producers in the AFI, several Basic Social Processes have been identified and explored, and one in particular 'Project Facilitation' is keyed for further examination. So far, the research has found that the Producer has a fundamental responsibility to maintain an environment which is nurturing and collaborative, and of the attributes the Producer seeks to enable this is a high reliance on interpersonal behaviour and communication.

ENDNOTES

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