Andrea Baker
Small Talk: Andrea Baker

Sociologist Andrea Baker has been researching interactions of people on the Internet for many years, but it was her "outing" as a researcher--as a participant observer of a Rolling Stones fan site--in the New York Times that brought her reflections here to light. Andrea's small talk is a great example of the complexities surrounding researcher reflexivity, researcher and researched engagement, and qualitative Internet research that many of us are facing in our work.

Taking a cue from sociologists who in past decades have discussed their field work errors (Daniels, 1985) and their media contacts, (e.g. see Schwartz, 1998, I will trace here the communication with respondents that occurred immediately after my early-stage project was picked up by a major newspaper. My goal is to provide clues for others researching communities on the internet about what can happen when our work is described by reporters, especially while doing field work and interviews. By looking at the process of "going public" and the response of online music fans in my research, perhaps others can learn something of what can happen and how to minimize damaging the reputation of ongoing research among its respondents. I discuss below first (1) the interaction between researcher and reporter before the resulting news piece, and then (2) the reactions from rock fans in online communities connected to my research. I conclude (3) with a short sum of the strengths and weaknesses of my approach to the fans.

When a writer for *The New York Times* first contacted me for later quotation in the Style section in an article eventually called "Pout Not Shout" about fan clubs for popular music figures, I was initially pleased. I had appeared in the newspaper before, for my research about couples that met online, (see Baker, 2005), and this fan research was in its very early stages.   The author's questions related to her major premise, that fans were "fighting back" against practices by performers that detracted from the fan experience such as expensive ticket prices and last-minute cancellations of concerts.   I had little or nothing to say about that topic, but since she had found my conference presentation on fan community, relationship and identity, I was a handy academic source or "expert". As it turned out, she quoted one other scholar at the beginning of her article, a researcher of fan violence many years ago. The vehemence with which she pursued answers in the face of my noncommittal responses was impressive, though slightly unnerving.   By the time of our second conversation I knew I'd have to accept her reporting results when she continued to misquote me in a statement about negative feelings of fans, even after I told her *she* said the words, not me. I had enough experience with the media to know that I had two choices, either accept that what would appear might not completely jibe with what I said or its context, or to bow out of the process entirely.

One point I knew could cause reaction to the article among the fans of The Rolling Stones I was studying was the issue of how many communities I was researching.   I had some degree of permission of leaders from four different online groups, but in only one of the online groups had I announced my intention to do research. One of the other three leaders had told me that he was open to the project and would do anything I needed to help. Since the first leader in charge of the online community of my greatest focus had already

promised an interview, as did the leader who offered his whole-hearted assistance, after some thought, I chose the number "two" in answer to the reporter's question. The other two other leaders told me I could interview members as desired, leaving open details about how I would analyze their boards. I wanted to have some degree of inter-group comparison built into the study, beyond the official fan site sponsored by the band itself. Although it does have a discussion board, that site is not much to debate the finer points of Rolling Stones lore but mainly to buy tickets to shows and band-related merchandise.

After the article appeared (Navarro, M. 2007), I was pleased to see that it included a quote about positive behavior I had attributed to fans, their "outpouring of concern" to Keith Richards after he had fallen while on a break between concerts, hit his head, and undergone brain surgery. Fans in the group Shattered set up an email to the New Zealand hospital he was in along with posting their worry and good wishes for recovery on all the fan groups. She still matched some of what I said to her story angle, turning my agreement with her own words, under pressure from her, into statements from me. I could live with the ideas printed ideas that fans can complain more efficiently, collectively online and that many fans were in closer contact with band members through the internet, if they or members of their organization read the fan boards.

One issue for researchers practicing qualitative internet research is how and where to set the boundaries (Markham and Baym, 2008, p. xvi) of a project population, not only between online and offline realms, but among communities within cyberspace. The news article drew comments from four of the major Rolling Stones fan groups. The leader of Shattered (a pseudonym) found the article, read it and posted it on his board the day after it came out, under the title "Andee and her SHATTERED* research in NY Times". "Andee" is my childhood nickname, a name often used by relatives and current friends, and my main online nickname (with a small "a") since 1994.   Soon after article went up, the reactions began, ranging from critical to laudatory.

While the research so far is almost entirely qualitative, I made a quantitative summary of the posts in the thread about the news article, coded by type of response. The reactions were almost equally split within the total post count of 21, (made by 18 fans) with eleven positive or supportive, and ten negative or neutral. I am leaving my own two posts out of the count, as most of my communication was to individuals in private messages, addressing their points. As expected, people who had expressed doubt to me before about the validity of the study and those who did not want to be interviewed for it accounted for all but two of the negative posts. Conversely, most of the positive posters had committed to participating fully in the research by agreeing to answer a set of questions by phone in semi-structured interviews.

In another group with a leader based in Europe in comparison to the U.S-oriented Shattered, a new thread called "Hey, are we all guinea pigs for someone's science experiment?!?" started a day after the news article came out. People chimed in with various comments, including the co-leader of Shattered saying I had full permission to study the group. Others who were familiar with my research plans chimed in with deflecting remarks, countering a couple of negative posters who questioned the validity of social science research. Further talk about the piece drew the leader of another of the online fan communities to say that he had met me and that I was a "nice lady". He also posted similar thoughts at this own group. (That very brief thread is

omitted from detailed analysis because it was lost in a change to a different software platform.) Since the reporter used my full name, posted publically at Shattered but not elsewhere, and since I hadn't announced the research or my university affiliation in these two communities, many neglected to connect the name in the article to my membership in the group. Also, I had two different usernames, andee, as mentioned, and "angee" which may have complicated recognition.

The response at the fan listserv, a community through email, came from one of the same people who showed negativity at Shattered after someone else posted the article. She noted that I was the researcher mentioned in the NY Times article, and that I was probably studying them as well as Shattered. I answered with a lengthy post to the listserv, talking about the research project, my background as a sociologist and internet researcher, and as a Stones fan, suggesting that any interested fans could contact me by email. In other forms, this professional and personal background had also appeared at Shattered prefacing the introduction of an online series of questions contained within its own forum. A couple of people on the list defended me and after a little back and forth writing, I stated that I didn't think the dialogue was progressing in the eyes of the original objector, that she had clearly demonstrated her attitude toward the research in more than one fan group, and that I remained open to friendly contact as our paths crossed elsewhere, offline or online. I had met several people offline from the community, and indeed all four of the online groups, having been a member of all of them, more or less actively for a full year or more before conceiving of the research. Those contacts may have increased my credibility as a fan of the band. I had contacted the head of the email group previously and he agreed to help the project.

After completing the IRB review, I was more confident in the number of groups in the study.   I would look at four different groups, still maintaining the centrality of the group Shattered, with most of the other emphasis on the large European-based community. I would use the other two online communities for comparison on community norms, identities and relationships. The IRB had supported my options for identifying people in interviews by their chosen names, whether a username, another name, or an anonymous presence, a respondent in the study. I went beyond the minimal ethical standards to say that while I may quote or paraphrase from posts in the boards, in no case would I link the words to particular users, unless I had received advance permission. Three of the groups can be googled through of search of username, community, and topic of discussion, revealing posts connected to names.

Looking at recent developments, nearly a year after the news article, people haven't yet asked me more about the methodology, but at Shattered, they did bring up how the study was progressing. I answered that I planned to do a book about the online fans, whether popular or academic. That seemed to satisfy the three people who asked, who were all interviewed by that point in the project. I anticipate more questions on one or more of the discussion boards in early 2009 when a blurb I wrote for a Stones fanzine is mailed out to subscribers. It says that I am doing research on fans visiting the Stones online communities, with focus on Shattered, as stated all along. I purposely included my two very similar usernames so people in all the groups would know who I am, and left open-ended the issue of how many communities were under study, saying "fan sites".

As many practitioners have noted, qualitative research is messy, and the data collection and analysis often proceed simultaneously (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). On my strengths related to elements of ethics and media, I had worked with all the leaders before the research to ensure a level of acceptance, even though most of the online communities in the pool of possibilities were public, where anyone could read, even without registering. I also used the words "in process" regularly in public postings to the board and in private messages and emails, a phrase accurately describing the evolution of the research. Another positive point is how an influential member and I worked out areas of confusion in private communication, allowing her to explain technicalities to other fans, even after questioning details herself.   I think I was careful, also, to avoid confrontations with individuals, maintaining professional decorum when responding to critiques. However, on the down side I wasn't prepared to outline the details of what I was doing until I successfully finished the Institutional Review Board review and even then, there remain grey areas in what I will ultimately use in my write-ups of the data. In general, I have approval from my institution's IRB to quote from the boards without the use of real names or usernames. How much a researcher should reveal even with a leaning toward "transparency" is still an unanswered question. Unanticipated benefits of the article were to raise awareness of the fans and to stir up support as well as opposition.

Ironically the reporter's theme of fans fighting back came to pass, with those aligning against the research, along with fan approval, affirmation much appreciated. Something I learned in graduate school about fieldwork is that people who like you will cooperate with you in your research, much the same as cordial relations work in the rest of life. That's quite true in this study. Our ability as researchers to interact online with our respondents (or subjects) and our informants as well as offline when researching both internet phenomena and face-to-face interactions gives us more avenues for promoting good will while providing more places for missteps.

REFERENCES

Baker, A. J. (2005). Double Click: Romance and Commitment Among Online Couples. Cresskill, N. J., Hampton Press.

Daniels, A. K. (1985)"Engagement and Ethical Responsibility in Field Work"…..

Glaser, B. G., and Strauss, A. N. (1967). The Discovery of Grounded Theory. Aldine deGruyter: New York.

Markham , A. N. and Baym, N.. K. (2008). Internet Inquiry: Conversations about Method. Sage: Thousand Oaks, CA.

Navarro, M. (2007). "Pout and Shout," The New York Times. Online: http://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/02/fashion/02fans.html?scp=1&sq=pout+and+shout&st=nyt

Schwartz, P. (1998). "Engaging Publics in Sociological Dialogue through the Media," Contemporary Sociology, 27(5), 439-45.