

Introduction

Since the first domestic video cameras were introduced on the market almost a quarter of a century ago, the opportunities for ordinary people to create their own moving-image representations have steadily grown. In the United States today, around 45 percent of households own video camcorders, while in the United Kingdom (where the research reported in this book was conducted), the figure is around one-third. The advent of mobile (cell) phones with video recording capacities and the “bundling” of digital editing software with standard home computers have led to video making becoming significantly more accessible, even ubiquitous. Meanwhile, YouTube and similar sites have made it much easier for people to share and distribute video to both known and previously unknown audiences.

Yet despite its increasing scale, there has been very little academic research on this phenomenon. This book arises from what we believe is the first large-scale social research project to explore domestic and amateur video production. Our research, which took place between 2005 and 2008, covered two main aspects. First, we looked at a series of amateur video making communities, ranging from skateboarders to amateur pornographers, and from groups of young men creating “spoofs” to share online to well-established clubs of elderly film and video makers. These were “serious amateurs,” for whom video making was a sustained leisure-time pursuit involving sometimes considerable investments of time and money. In addition to an online survey, we conducted a series of in-depth case studies, using interviews and observations, as well as viewing a large number of amateur video productions. We have published our

account of these “camcorder cultures” elsewhere (Buckingham and Willett 2009).

While they are interesting to study, such amateur groups are obviously unrepresentative. Very few of the millions of people who now own video cameras are likely to engage in video making in such sustained and dedicated ways. In most cases, the camera is likely to be used only occasionally, perhaps on special occasions, or simply when the opportunity arises. For much of the time, it may languish unused in the cupboard or under the bed. In the terms provided by the sociologist Robert Stebbins (2007), most domestic video making is more a matter of “casual leisure” than “serious leisure”: it is intermittent, spontaneous, even haphazard, rather than being a committed and regular practice.

In most cases, these everyday uses are also likely to be confined to what Richard Chalfen (1987) calls the “home mode”—that is, the use of media to represent the private world of domestic life. Here, we find people recording children’s birthday parties, family outings, and holidays or simply fooling around, playing with the camera. These people are not primarily interested in video making as an activity in itself: they may not care much about the quality or the aesthetic character of what they produce or about the technological potentialities of their equipment. They may well be concerned to capture events as clearly and even accurately as they can, but they are not particularly interested in improving their camera technique, editing their recordings, or showing their videos to a wider audience beyond family and friends. On the contrary, their interest is essentially in the *content* of what they record and in the possibility that video affords of being able to view that content again, perhaps at some point in the future when the people and places they have captured are only distant memories.

It was with the aim of exploring these more everyday practices that we undertook the second part of our research. Via a local school and a community center, we recruited a group of 12 households living in the vicinity of our university research lab in central London. This was a very diverse group, in terms of social class, family composition, and ethnic background. We gave each household a video camcorder to keep and tracked what they did with it over a period of around 15 months. This was clearly not intended to be a representative sample, but an in-depth,

broadly “ethnographic” collection of case studies. We visited and interviewed members of each household on several occasions and gathered examples of the videos they were making. What the participants did with their video cameras was very diverse, and by no means was all of it confined within the home mode. In addition to the birthday parties, holiday footage, and playful messing about that we expected to find, we also gathered and were told about examples of video diaries, documentaries, comedy skits, and remakes or parodies of well-known films—as well as a great deal of material that defies easy categorization or indeed interpretation. This book is the result of our analysis of all the data we collected.

As we write, there is growing excitement both in academic circles and in public debate about the democratic potential of new media technologies, including digital video. We are apparently moving into a new era of “participatory culture,” in which power is passing away from the elites and multinational corporations that used to control the media and into the hands of ordinary people (for more and less cautious examples of this argument, see, respectively, Jenkins 2006 and Hannon, Bradwell, and Tims 2008). While we certainly sympathize with the aspirations that are often expressed here, we are very skeptical of the more grandiose claims about the impending democratization of media. There are various reasons for this. While some of these are beyond the scope of this book (see Buckingham 2010), the key issue that concerns us here has to do with the unrepresentative nature of the practices such enthusiasts tend to describe.

In this as in many other areas, cultural studies researchers are often keen to fix on areas of cultural activity that appear somehow subversive, radical, or challenging. Henry Jenkins’s (2006) work on “convergence culture,” for example, focuses largely on highly dedicated groups of media fans, who are busily appropriating and reworking existing media texts through their own creative media productions. This is fair enough, but as Jean Burgess (2006) argues, it may lead us to neglect the more banal, everyday ways in which people use media—which in the case of video making are typically much less cool and glamorous. Just as enthusiastic fans cannot stand in for media users in general, so dedicated amateurs do not represent “ordinary” people’s use of video.

Cultural studies frequently proclaims its interest in “popular repre-

sentation,” but it has tended to ignore or marginalize the very forms of popular representation (and indeed *self*-representation) in which “the people” are routinely engaged. As we shall see in chapter 1, there has been some useful work on domestic photography, but very little sustained analysis of home movie or video making. In our view, researchers need to resist the continuing temptation to look elsewhere for the really cool stuff and spend more time engaging with the kinds of mundane, everyday cultural practices that we consider here.

In the following chapter, we provide a broad context for our discussion of home video making and discuss some of the theoretical perspectives and the previous research that have informed our work. We set the scene by considering the widespread dissemination of domestic video technology and the ways in which home video making is discursively “framed” in both popular and academic commentary. In general, we suggest, the home mode has been viewed pejoratively, as somehow insufficiently serious, artistic, or indeed politically challenging. We outline some academic perspectives that might enable us to understand what ordinary people do with video in a less dismissive and judgmental way.

Chapter 2 gives an account of the methodology of our project and introduces the 12 households that we studied. We draw attention here to some of the methodological and ethical issues raised by this kind of broadly “ethnographic” research and some of the dilemmas and choices that we faced in analyzing and writing up our data.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 then present our analysis of the data. Rather than discussing each household in turn—an approach that we find leads to rather laborious reading—we have sought to pull out some broader themes that cut across our individual case studies. We recognize that this may place greater demands on the reader’s attention—rather like reading one of those nineteenth-century novels with an enormous cast of characters—and so we hope that readers will be able to refer back to the brief introductory sketches we provide in chapter 2.

In chapter 3 we provide an overview of the range of video making practices in the 12 households. We describe the different reasons and motivations for video making, the ways in which the technology was used, and how the participants defined their identities as video makers. Our main focus here is on the ways in which video making was accom-

modated within the texture of everyday domestic life: where and when people used the camcorder; who in the household was able to use it and for what purposes; and how this related to broader divisions of power within the family (e.g., in relation to gender and generation), as well as to wider networks of extended family and friends. The discussion in this chapter thus relates to broader debates about the sociology of family life and specifically to recent work on the “domestication” of technology.

Chapter 4 focuses on the subjective experience of video making and its place in relation to emotion, memory, and personal identity. It begins by considering how people respond to the experience of seeing themselves on screen and, conversely, how it feels to be the video maker. It then moves on to look more broadly at the role of video making in relation to memory and the creation of “narratives of the self.” It explores how our participants used video as a means of freezing passing time for future viewing, how this future was imagined, and how video enabled them to create stories of their lives and to locate themselves in their physical and emotional world. This chapter builds upon theories of identity and subjectivity, including psychoanalysis, which have previously been used in relation to still imagery (notably domestic photography).

In chapter 5, we look more closely at how and what people learn about video production. We explore the different methods that our participants used to learn—for example, referring to published sources, seeking help from others, learning by doing, and imitating or drawing on mainstream media models. We consider the extent to which they planned their videotaping, whether they edited or engaged in other “post-production” activities, and what motivated them to want to make “better” videos. We then move on to look at *what* they learned—their understanding of the specific qualities of video as a medium, their awareness of “film language” and specific techniques (e.g., to do with framing and editing), and the different aesthetic and generic sources and traditions on which they drew. This chapter thus relates directly to contemporary discussions of “media literacy” and to broader theories of learning.

In our conclusion, we turn to what we suspect is the key question that will be nagging many of our readers. What is the social, cultural, and political significance of such apparently mundane activities? Is widespread access to “the means of media production” likely to precipitate

a revolution that will overthrow dominant forms of media power? And if it is not, then what purpose and value does it have? Here, we want to contest the sense of *disappointment* that pervades much academic discussion of home video making—the sense that some potential challenge to the Powers That Be has somehow been defused or recuperated and that people have been distracted by trivialities. This is of course a familiar argument in discussions of popular culture, and in this context, it is accentuated by a view of the home mode as somehow necessarily conservative and supportive of a particular “familial ideology.” We hope that our analysis of these 12 households will provide a more nuanced and sympathetic account that does better justice to the contingencies of ordinary people’s everyday lives and the diverse roles that media play within them.