SAGE researchmethods cases

Switching on the BBC: Using Recursive Abstraction to Undertake a Narrative Inquiry-Based Investigation Into the BBC's Early Strategic Business and Management Issues

Abstract

This case study considers the use of the recursive abstraction qualitative research method within the context of a narrative inquiry. Although part of a larger project that considers a range of sources over a period of years, the text being analyzed for this case study has been retrieved from a 1928 copy of the *BBC Handbook*. The purpose of the research is to use the information within this book to identify the BBC's early strategic business and management issues. The part of the *BBC Handbook* being considered is the introduction, which was written by Reith who at the time was the Director-General of the BBC. The recursive abstraction method has been employed to undertake the required qualitative analysis of the introduction. This method comprises six steps, which are used to isolate and highlight text of interest. The highlighted text is then paraphrased, and gradually the paraphrased comments are collapsed to form themes and codes. Using this process, it is possible to identify from the themes and codes the core underlying trends that represent the strategic business and management issues of most importance to the Director-General. From the 4½ pages of text, 14 strategic business and management issues have been highlighted, some of which are unexpected and represent an original contribution to our understanding of the issues facing the BBC at this time.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this case, students should be able to

- Describe the process of narrative inquiry
- Discuss the use of the recursive abstraction six-step method
- Implement recursive abstraction applied to continuous narrative to identify data for analysis
- Examine qualitative data to identify key trends and issues
- Appraise the early strategic business and management issues faced by the BBC

Project Overview and Context

The British Broadcasting Company (BBC), as it was at first, was born through a fusion of government control and commercial interest on 18 October 1922 with John Charles Walsham Reith (subsequently Lord Reith) as its General Manager (Briggs, 1961, p. 123). According to Taylor (2013), when the first broadcasters sent their words and music out into the "ether," they had no model for how this new medium should be structured, to whom it would appeal, or even, who might be listening. The BBC had only a high-minded ideal that it was to inform, educate, and entertain; to encourage listeners to sample a varied and largely unplanned output; and to encounter a range of program content.

Radio broadcasting quickly became hugely successful and was accessed by the public via the purchase of a radio license which permitted the operation of a "receiving set," or, as it is now more commonly known, a

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"radio." According to Taylor (2013, p. 74), whereas in 1922, only 36,000 radio licenses were issued, by 1927 this had grown to over 2 million. However, notwithstanding this impressive trajectory in license sales, the British Parliament considered that it was not right that broadcasting in the United Kingdom should be run by a commercial company. They felt instead that broadcasting was so important it should operate under a single authority, as a public corporation, which derived its power from a Royal Charter. The British Broadcasting Company was therefore evolved into the British Broadcasting Corporation, with Reith staying in charge as the Director-General. Broadcasting was to operate under monopoly control in the United Kingdom, with a newly defined remit for Public Service Broadcasting.

The popularity of radio was phenomenal, but there were also some dissenting voices to the idea of the extensive authority which the new Corporation had been accorded by Parliament. Whenever the BBC presented itself to the British public, there was always a subtext by which it sought to justify its authority and win over its critics. This current research project is therefore attempting to uncover some of the subtle underlying strategic business and management issues that the BBC faced during these early years, and to enable us to do this, we will be using a publication called the *BBC Handbook*.

The first *BBC Handbook* was published in 1928 and provided an overview of the previous year, through which the BBC reported to the public on its own performance—and successes. Each year, a revised copy was published and so, to us as researchers, these publications have now become an important source of historical business information. While our project will consider the first 10 years of issues for the *BBC Handbook* (also sometimes called the *BBC Yearbook* or *BBC Annual*), for this case study, we will focus on the 1928 issue.

Research Design

Within the 1928 edition of the *BBC Handbook*, the first pages represent an introduction by Reith in which he discusses the issues which the BBC had encountered over the previous 12-month period. Although it forms the opening few pages of the book, this introduction is written in a very personal style, making it almost seem as if Reith was giving a speech. This form of flowing prose is called "narrative" and the process of analyzing such text is called "narrative inquiry."

Narrative inquiry is therefore a qualitative research method, as it is focused upon the meaning behind words, and the views and opinions being expressed. According to Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill (2012), narrative inquiry can be applied to research applications in which there is a requirement to analyze a variety of written forms of personal accounts such as notes, letters, conversations, and journal entries.

Just like many other qualitative studies, the purpose of the narrative inquiry is not to consider precise details, but to identify underlying trends and issues. Reliability is about the repeatability and transparency of the research being undertaken, that is, if another researcher undertook an analysis of the same text, would they identify the same underlying trends and issues? To ensure that this can happen, a systematic process of analysis is therefore required which will take the selected text and distill it down so that the key themes can be

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identified. Such a systematic approach ensures that the research can be repeated by others, with the same outcome. For this case study, the selected qualitative analysis method is called recursive abstraction.

According to Polkinghorne and Arnold (2014), recursive abstraction is a six-step method defined as follows:

> **Step 1**—Highlight and extract interesting sections within the selected text.
>
> **Step 2**—Transfer the selected text into a spreadsheet or table for easy data manipulation.
>
> **Step 3**—Paraphrase the data to make easier to manage and manipulate.
>
> **Step 4**—Group connected paraphrased comments into themes. Delete duplications.
>
> **Step 5**—Code paraphrased comments to describe the meaning in just one or two words.
>
> *Repeat Steps 4 and/or 5, revising and collapsing codes and the themes to which they are aligned, until saturation point has been achieved. Saturation is when there is no benefit to be gained from further collapsing of the data, or rearrangement of the codes and themes.*
>
> **Step 6**—Identify patterns within the resulting themes and codes that reveal underlying trends and issues within the original data.
>
> *When trends and issues are spotted, return to the original data to check that meaning has not been lost or changed during the analysis process.*

One of the advantages of the recursive abstraction method is that Steps 4 and 5 can be continued until underlying trends and issues are revealed to the researcher.

Researcher bias is when the researchers themselves introduce elements into the research based upon their own personal experiences, culture, and values. Researcher bias therefore can affect the validity of the research results obtained, and so to avoid researcher bias, for Step 1 of the recursive abstraction process, it is important that *all* potentially relevant sections of text are extracted from the narrative for subsequent analysis. In this case, the language of the text being analyzed is quite difficult to understand in places, and the meaning is sometimes obscure. To overcome this, while undertaking Step 3, two members of the research team independently paraphrased the text to extract the appropriate meaning, and then compared results to validate the outcomes.

The scope of this research is focused upon strategic business and management issues facing the BBC, and so only underlying trends and issues identified that relate to this topic are to be retained; any aspects subsequently identified which are not related should be ignored in the final stages during Step 6.

The time horizon for this research is cross-sectional, that is, this research considers the data at a single point in time compared with longitudinal research which considers changes in data over a period of time. Even though the narrative being evaluated was written in 1928, this research remains cross-sectional as the data still present the views and opinions expressed by the Director-General of the BBC at that time.

Research Practicalities

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Access

Being almost 90 years old, the first *BBC Handbooks*, *Yearbooks,* and *Annuals* required for analysis in this study are now quite rare and increasingly difficult to access in hardcopy format.

Bournemouth University has a media history special collection. Special Collections are a type of archive. A search revealed that copies were not held for all the particular years of interest to this project.

The BBC Written Archives at Caversham holds copies, but these could not be removed for inspection over a period of time. Access was therefore negotiated with the Hamworthy Radio private archive.

The curator of the Hamworthy Radio private archive established a set of rules regarding which records could be accessed, when this could happen, and for how long. As researchers, we had to comply with these requirements if we wanted to use these source materials.

Examples of the conditions placed upon the research team included

- Photocopying—not permitted
- Photography—no use of flash permitted
- Transportation—only within a padded crate
- Inspection—only to be undertaken in areas away from food and drink
- Availability—limited to the agreed research team
- Storage—restricted to a safe, secure, dry, and lockable place agreed in advance

Inclusion

An initial review of the source material was undertaken that revealed significant variability in the amount of potentially useful narrative materials within the introductory chapters of each of the *BBC Handbooks*, *Yearbooks,* and *Annuals* being considered.

This level of variation is typical in narrative inquiry because the materials being studied have been developed by different people, at different times, and considering different priorities. Changes in length, quality, and content should therefore be expected and it is a requirement that researchers are as accommodating as possible in their approach. However, sufficiency must be considered to ensure that enough useful and relevant data can be obtained in order for the study being undertaken to be valid, reliable, and feasible.

Ethics

Ethics approval for the research was obtained from Bournemouth University. The need for a participation information sheet was reduced as there was no human inclusion as actual participants. However, in terms of conveying the purpose and scope of the research to the curator of the private archive from which the source

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materials were obtained, an information sheet was still required to ensure that understanding of the research being undertaken, the use of the results obtained, and the role of the archived materials being requested were all clearly defined and transparent. Research should not cause risk of embarrassment, harm, pain, or any other material disadvantage to those participating, or to those supporting your research. Written consent from the archive was therefore required to ensure that the curator fully understood both the risks and potential benefits of being involved.

Using the Recursive Abstraction Method

The narrative inquiry is therefore undertaken using the Polkinghorne and Arnold (2014) six-step method, with each of the steps, and the connected research considerations, being discussed in turn.

Step 1—Extracting the Data

The original narrative needs to be read and re-read several times before extracting the data. This repeated reading enables the researcher to gain an overview of the whole narrative, and an understanding of its flow, style, and structure.

From the narrative, sections of text are highlighted and extracted. In some cases, these sections may be quite long, and on other occasions, they may be only single phrases or sentences. In total, 31 sections of text were extracted from the narrative, with the shortest being only 3 words in length, and the longest being more than 125 words. Some examples of the extracted text are provided below to offer an indication of the writing style being used by Reith (1928):

- "At the beginning it was an assertion—in view of the state of things in America, a very necessary assertion—of the position that it was intended to take up, a flag to hoist over claimed territory."
- "One is liable, and indeed certain, to make mistakes which the instantaneity, the intimacy, and the universality of the mode of transmission render it almost impossible to retrieve and even to limit."
- "The preferences [of public opinion] individually expressed cancel one another out as often as not and a proportion of correspondence even praises or blames everything alike. Much is owed to the diligence and zeal of advisory committees."
- "… instruction for adults and children, in a continuous way or by way of single appetizer … the mere fact that such a medium is there—able to override distance, to overcome inequalities of teaching ability, to broadcast seed on a wind that will take it to every fertile corner—imposes the duty of taking advantage of it."
- "Certain classes of material were excluded [from broadcast] by the technical certainty that justice will not be done to them in transmission." (pp. 31–35)

Steps 2 and 3—Tabularizing and Paraphrasing the Data

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All of the extracted data sections need to be placed into a tabular format that will allow for easy sorting and reordering. This research team used Excel within Microsoft Office 365 Pro Plus for this manipulation, but other spreadsheet packages are also available and just as suitable.

Once the identified data are placed within the spreadsheet, a paraphrased version of each extracted section of text is created by the researcher. The need for more than one researcher to consider the meaning behind the extracted data now becomes more evident due to the archaic writing style utilized by the writer, which is often difficult to decipher and confusing as a result.

Examples of the paraphrased data created are provided in Table 1, where they are co-located alongside the original text for easy comparison. It should be noted that in some cases, the original text has been paraphrased into just a single line, whereas on other occasions, the research team considered that multiple points were being made simultaneously, and so several paraphrased comments have been developed to ensure that essential meaning has been retained.

Table 1. Examples of paraphrased data compared with original narrative.

Original narrative	Paraphrased data
At the beginning it was an assertion—in view of the state of things in America, a very necessary assertion—of the position that it was intended to take up, a flag to hoist over claimed territory.	• Through public service, the United Kingdom has differentiated itself from the way that broadcasting has been regulated in the United States.
One is liable, and indeed certain, to make mistakes which the instantaneity, the intimacy, and the universality of the mode of transmission render it almost impossible to retrieve and even to limit.	• Live radio is subject to risks. • The impact of mistakes (commercial, reputational, and/or societal) is uncontrollable.
The preferences [of public opinion] individually expressed cancel one another out as often as not and a proportion of correspondence even praises or blames everything alike. Much is owed to the diligence and zeal of advisory committees.	• Public feedback rarely provides definite guidance. • Program content was monitored by advisory committees.
… instruction for adults and children, in a continuous way or by way of single appetizer … the mere fact that such a medium is there—able to override distance, to overcome inequalities of teaching ability, to	• Educational broadcasting was able to override distance. • Educational broadcasting

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broadcast seed on a wind that will take it to every fertile corner—imposes the duty of taking advantage of it.	could overcome inequalities of teaching ability. • Educational broadcasting could inspire people.
Certain classes of material were excluded [from broadcast] by the technical certainty that justice will not be done to them in transmission.	• Programs broadcast were restricted by technology limitations regarding possible transmission quality.

Step 4—Group Paraphrased Comments Into Themes

Considering the paraphrased comments both holistically and individually, themes start to emerge. The initial themes identified by the researchers were as follows:

- Business Competition
- Business Ethos
- Business Model
- Business Reputation
- Customer Feedback
- Organizational Infrastructure
- Program Innovation
- Technological Innovation

To develop these eight initial themes, the researchers considered different alternatives because the initial themes identified by the researchers needed to encapsulate as many of the paraphrased comments as possible, while still retaining a useful indication of the variety of topics.

Initial themes are often changed during the analysis phase, either because it becomes apparent that there are better options to choose from the beginning, or because the research has revealed trends within the data and so there are more appropriate themes appearing that need to be adopted instead. It is therefore important that the researcher recognizes the iterative nature of the process so that they retain flexibility, allowing them to follow the direction of the data, and so modify their approach accordingly.

Once the themes have been identified, the paraphrased data can be grouped against the theme considered to be most appropriate. More themes can be added if required and unused themes can be removed. Scarcely used themes can be merged together, as the objective is to ensure that each item of paraphrased data is linked to a theme, and that all themes have a reasonable selection of data associated with them. Examples of grouping the paraphrased data against themes is demonstrated in Table 2 for the specific themes of

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"Business Reputation" and "Program Innovation." It may be noted that some paraphrased comments appear against more than one theme. This is because they were considered by the research team to have a broad influence.

Table 2. Grouping the paraphrased data against themes.

Theme: Business Reputation
Broadcasters selected what their audience could listen to.
Broadcasting develops an individual and intimate relationship with the listener.
Broadcasting inevitably transfers choice from the listener themselves to the broadcaster.
Broadcasting program management can make mistakes.
Live radio is subject to risks.
Material presented entirely appropriately at a venue or in a publication may be in bad taste when broadcast to a family group.
Mistakes will happen and can't be retrieved or limited.
Pioneering broadcast radio was full of risks (commercial, reputational, and/or societal).
Respecting that listeners didn't always have the appetite for classical music.
The impact of mistakes (commercial, reputational, and/or societal) is uncontrollable.
The speed of change increased these risks.
Theme: Program Innovation
Broadcasting opera it will help it to overcome the barriers of cost.
Educational broadcasting could be continuous courses or single appetizers.
Educational broadcasting could reach adults and children.

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Educational broadcasting was able to override distance.
Music broadcasting could promote new works.
Pioneering broadcast radio was full of risks (commercial, reputational, and/or societal).
Religious broadcasting was non-sectarian Christianity to appeal to a great audience.
The concept of Children's hour was innovative and invented by broadcasters.
The concept of radio drama was innovative and invented by broadcasters.

Step 5—Coding the Paraphrased Comments

Taking each theme in turn, the paraphrased data are replaced by a code. Codes, in this sense, need to retain an indication of the meaning contained in the paraphrased comment, which in turn has summarized the meaning of the original extracted data taken from the narrative being analyzed.

Codes should be brief, and the primary objective in this step of the process is to find one or two appropriate words that summarize the meaning. The expectation is that the codes will also be slightly generic so that several paraphrased comments within a theme can be represented by the same codes.

Interestingly, when a paraphrased comment appeared against more than one theme, it was often coded differently each time. This is because in the context of the theme, the meaning of that individual paraphrased comment was different. For example, pioneering broadcasting in the context of "Business Reputation" represented risk taking, whereas in the context of "Program Innovation," it represented an opportunity to try something different which would widen the experience of the listening public and so break down barriers.

In this way, the data that have already been collapsed from the full narrative into the paraphrased comments can now be further collapsed into a small number of codes. Once again, considering the themes of "Business Reputation" and "Program Innovation," Table 3 demonstrates how the paraphrased data from Table 2 can be converted into relevant codes. In each case, the codes look beyond the words to find the meaning behind them. Sometimes this meaning is obvious—"Live radio is subject to risks" is clearly discussing the BBC taking risks—whereas on other occasions, the meaning is much deeper—"The concept of Children's hour was innovative and invented by broadcasters" is reflecting on how the BBC is widening the horizons of its listening audience, and so this comment is less about *what* the BBC is doing, and in fact is more about *why* they are doing it.

Table 3. Coding the paraphrased data.

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	Code
Theme: Business Reputation	
Broadcasters selected what their audience could listen to.	Control
Broadcasting develops an individual and intimate relationship with the listener.	Control
Broadcasting inevitably transfers choice from the listener himself to the broadcaster.	Control
Broadcasting program management can make mistakes.	Risk Taking
Live radio is subject to risks.	Risk Taking
Material presented entirely appropriately at a venue or in a publication may be in bad taste when broadcast to a family group.	Risk Taking
Mistakes will happen and can't be retrieved or limited.	Risk Taking
Pioneering broadcast radio was full of risks (commercial, reputational, and/or societal).	Risk Taking
Respecting that listeners didn't always have the appetite for classical music.	Respecting Boundaries
The impact of mistakes (commercial, reputational, and/or societal) is uncontrollable.	Risk Taking
The speed of change increased these risks.	Pace of Technology
Theme: Program Innovation	
Broadcasting opera it will help it to overcome the barriers of cost.	Breaking Down Barriers
Educational broadcasting could be continuous courses or single appetizers.	Agent for Change

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Educational broadcasting could reach adults and children.	Agent for Change
Educational broadcasting was able to override distance.	Inclusivity
Music broadcasting could promote new works.	Breaking Down Barriers
Pioneering broadcast radio was full of risks (commercial, reputational, and/or societal).	Breaking Down Barriers
Religious broadcasting was non-sectarian Christianity to appeal to a great audience.	Breaking Down Barriers
The concept of Children's hour was innovative and invented by broadcasters.	Widening Horizons
The concept of radio drama was innovative and invented by broadcasters.	Widening Horizons

On this occasion, the research team decided that knowing the frequency with which each code had occurred would be useful information to retain as it would provide an indication of the importance of each code, that is, a code representing multiple paraphrased comments would be more important than a code representing just a few paraphrased comments. Table 4 details the frequency of the occurrence of codes within all eight of the emerging themes.

Table 4. Frequency of occurrence for codes within themes.

Theme: Business Reputation	Theme: Program Innovation
Risk Taking (6)	Breaking Down the Barriers (3)
Domination (2)	Agent for Change (2)
Pace of Change (1)	Widening Horizons (2)
Respecting Boundaries (1)	Inclusion (1)

Theme: Organizational Infrastructure	Theme: Technological Innovation
Pace of Technology (3)	Pace of Technology (2)
Product Complexity (2)	Agent for Change (1)
Theme: Business Ethos	**Theme: Business Model**
Guardian of Values (5)	Inclusion (6)
Inclusion (4)	Widening Horizons (5)
Public Duty (4)	Breaking Down Barriers (4)
Public Service (4)	Guardian of Values (4)
Breaking Down Barriers (2)	Domination (3)
Domination (2)	Pace of Change (2)
Impartiality (2)	Respecting Boundaries (2)
	Risk Taking (1)
Theme: Business Competition	**Theme: Customer Feedback**
Market Share (5)	Mass Nature of the Audience (4)
Breath of Change (2)	
Respecting Boundaries (2)	
Inclusion (1)	

Codes were then further collapsed and merged together so that minor codes representing just a few paraphrased comments could be joined. As part of this process, the codes needed to be renamed to ensure that they remained representative.

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Codes were then further collapsed and merged together so that minor codes representing just a few paraphrased comments could be joined. As part of this process, the codes needed to be renamed to ensure that they remained representative.

This process was further extrapolated by a decision to remove all new codes that represented fewer than three paraphrased codes. The rationale behind this decision was that it would allow the research to concentrate on the most important codes, and as the consequential removal of some lesser codes was taken, irrespective of topic, so that there was no implication of researcher bias being present. Table 5 demonstrates the further collapsing and combining of codes to form new codes, and the resulting number of paraphrased comments that each new code therefore represents.

Table 5. Further collapsing of the codes.

Old code	New code
Theme: Business Reputation	
Risk Taking + Pace of Change	Responsiveness (7)
Domination + Respecting Boundaries	Market Definition (3)
Theme: Organizational Infrastructure	
Pace of Technology + Product Complexity	Entrepreneurial Attitude (5)
Theme: Business Ethos	
Public Duty + Public Service	Public Service (8)
Guardian of Values + Impartiality	Values (7)
Domination + Inclusion	Monopoly (6)
Agent for Change + Breaking Down Barriers	Progressive (Cultural) (5)
Theme: Business Competition	
Market Share + Breath of Change + Respecting Boundaries + Inclusion	Market Impact (8)

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Theme: Program Innovation	
Breaking Down the Barriers + Agent for Change + Widening Horizons	Mandate for Creativity (7)
Theme: Tech Innovation	
Pace of Technology + Agent for Change	Driving Technology Change (3)
Theme: Business Model	
Domination + Inclusion	Core Values (9)
Widening Horizons + Breaking Down Barriers	Forefront of Technology (9)
Guardian of Values + Respecting Boundaries	Symbiotic Relationship (6)
Theme: Customer Feedback	
Mass Nature of the Audience	Diversity of Audience (4)

Step 6—Identifying Trends and Patterns

The collapsing of the themes and codes in Steps 4 and 5 can continue until saturation is reached and there is no additional value to be gained by further collapsing and merging. In fact, the reality is that once you pass the optimal point, the value of the resulting data becomes less and less useful as it is too bland and meaningless, and the wonderful richness of the original qualitative data within the narrative being analyzed is lost.

Bearing this in mind, the research team decided to stop the analysis at this point which revealed 14 strategic business and management issues (Table 6) that Reith considered to be important enough to report and highlight in the introduction to the issue of the *BBC Handbook* (Reith, 1928) being analyzed. The findings were then mapped back against the original narrative data to validate that changes in meaning and understanding had not occurred during the analysis process.

Table 6. Final themes and codes representing strategic business and management issues facing the BBC in its early years.

Final themes	Final codes (business issues)

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Business Competition	1. Market Impact
Business Ethos	2. Public Sector
	3. Values
	4. Monopoly
	5. Progressive (Cultural)
Business Model	6. Core Values
	7. Forefront of Technology
	8. Symbiotic Relationship With Sector
Business Reputation	9. Responsiveness
	10. Market Definition
Customer Feedback	11. Diversity of Audience
Organizational Infrastructure	12. Entrepreneurial Attitude
Program Innovation	13. Mandate for Creativity
Technological Innovation	14. Driving Technological Change

Discussion

As a researcher, we can now consider what these findings may mean. For example, it is clear that many of the issues identified relate to the business model being used by the BBC and also to the ethos behind the organization itself.

Technology was changing rapidly at the time and the BBC was being forced to adapt as quickly as it could, but simultaneously it had the tension of being a public sector broadcasting organization, which meant that it could not leave behind any sector of society, which might not be able to access or afford more expensive

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radio equipment. Reith (1928) defined this tension quite succinctly by stating that the service that the BBC was providing should give the public "at least one programme a day, accessible in good strength and faithful quality to the owner of a cheap set and an average aerial" (p. 32).

In many ways, the BBC was actually the cause of the changes in technology as its entrepreneurial approach was pushing the boundaries of what was possible in terms of both hardware (broadcasting and listening equipment) and also through program innovation and creativity. Reith (1928) makes particular mention of how "radio drama and the children's hour are two forms of art that broadcasting is developing specifically on its own" (p. 34) and so original programs such as these were key elements of the BBC's unique selling point (USP) and reinforced its competitive advantage.

There was a strong recognition at the time that an opportunity existed regarding the potential provision of program content which covered the full range from educational material to popular culture. This was a very progressive stance for the BBC to take, but it was also a reflection of the perceived need for it to differentiate itself from other media such as newspapers and theaters and broadcasters abroad, particularly the much less regulated model operating in the United States. It was also a recognition of the diversity of the listening audience which potentially comprised every single citizen of the United Kingdom. On this point, Reith (1928) reflects that the "public" who were the listening audience meant "the totality of the inhabitants of these islands—and eventually those of the continent and overseas—irrespective of age and sex, tastes and education, religion and politics, wealth and status" (p. 32).

Having been established as a public service broadcaster with an effective monopoly of the airwaves over the United Kingdom, the BBC was in a position to dictate the content of the programs broadcast with absolute authority, yet it also had a responsibility to adhere to and to communicate its core values, while defining its market in such a way that the impact was not viewed in a hostile way by the private sector. As Reith (1928) himself stated, "even the gramophone might look upon the radio as an interloper" (p. 32). Boundaries had to be defined, and a symbiotic relationship with the rest of the sector was born from which we still benefit today.

Practical Lessons Learned

When accessing archives to use their sources for your own research purposes, extra time must be allowed so that you can negotiate with the gatekeeper. A gatekeeper in this context is the person who controls access to the archive and can make demands, and place conditions, upon your use of any documents required. The curator of the private archive needed certain reassurances and placed several conditions on this research project. The time taken for this negotiation and any additional time which constraints or restrictions might add into the project should not be underestimated.

When you do use data from archive sources, then it is important for the researcher to consider the meaning in accordance with the context of the time being considered, that is, historical data can provide a useful understanding of what previously happened, and why, and there may be lessons to be learnt from the past

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that can relate to decisions that we need to make in the present, but historical data shouldn't be judged against the standards of today as to do so would be to misunderstand it.

The nature of research is often unpredictable, and it is important that each researcher maintains a degree of flexibility in their approach to the research to ensure that they can accommodate unexpected events, discoveries, challenges, and barriers. For this case study, the need for two researchers to independently interpret the meaning behind the selected text during the paraphrasing step doubled the workload and delayed the progress of the research significantly. However, this measure was crucial to ensure the subsequent validity of the resulting research findings.

Paraphrasing data is difficult, even for the experienced researcher, and so time and patience is required to get it right. The researcher also has to consider what the original narrative actually means, and then find a shorter way of expressing this. Making the paraphrased version too short can lose meaning before coding occurs, yet leaving the paraphrased data too long makes everything difficult to handle and process.

When using the recursive abstraction process, one of the early questions faced by the researcher is the choice of initial themes. Within an interview context, the initial themes can be based upon the questions asked, but within a narrative inquiry, there are no direct questions being asked and so often using the timeline of the narrative can sometimes be a good starting point, that is, grouping together points made at the start, middle, and end of the narrative.

Themes can also be selected based on existing theory, pre-conceived ideas, and research questions being investigated or by allowing the themes themselves to emerge from the data. This was the method used for this case study, as it was thought that this would reduce the chances of researcher bias.

The researcher needs to be confident to be successful when using recursive abstraction and needs to "own the data." Initial efforts to collapse the data into themes and codes can easily be halted by the researcher because they are unwilling to combine themes together and/or to combine codes, yet this is a natural and required aspect of the process. Sometimes codes may be combined because they are similar, for example, "risk taking when undertaking innovative developments" and "pace of change of broadcasting" both relate to the theme of "business reputation" because they are similar to each other. On another occasion, codes may be combined because they are dis-similar and yet inextricably linked together, an example of this being the "domination of the BBC in UK broadcasting" and the "public service need to be inclusive" both form part of the business ethos theme and yet are opposite to each other.

The flexibility to tailor the recursive abstraction process allowed the researchers to delay deleting duplications until a later step in the process, which for this application was really important, as by that stage, the codes had been collapsed sufficiently to permit the number of occurrences of each code to be counted; this in turn indicated which codes were most popular. Popularity in this context represented an indication of the importance, that is, if an issue was mentioned many times, it was considered likely to have been important in comparison with another issue which was only mentioned once.

Collapsing codes by combining them, and often renaming them as a result, requires the researcher to look beyond the words, and to focus instead on the actual intended meaning. Very often, the original narrative will say the same point in a variety of different ways, but spotting this can be challenging. For example, in the case study, the Reith discussed how the BBC needed to widen the horizons of the listening public, and also how the BBC wanted to break down the barriers of the pre-conceived ideas that the public had. The researcher needs to realize that these are two different ways of explaining the exact same point, and so apply the same code to each.

Conclusion

The recursive abstraction method used in this case study has proved to be very useful for this application. The original narrative from the 1928 edition of the *BBC Handbook* was difficult to read due to the style of writing used, which meant that the messages and thoughts being conveyed were not always obvious to the modern reader.

Using the Polkinghorne and Arnold (2014) six-step recursive abstraction method enabled key points to be extracted from the narrative based on underlying trends. The subsequent collapsing and coding of the data in a systematic manner enabled themes to be revealed that would previously have been impossible to identify.

The ability of the research team to tailor the process to the research application ensured that the early codes and themes could be adapted. As a result, they could take into account the frequency of occurrence of each code within a theme which provided a useful sense of the importance of each one.

Fourteen key business and management issues were identified by the analysis process. Although some findings might be considered to be fairly predictable to anyone with a knowledge of the subject matter and era being considered, others were a surprise to the research team, and so this research has uncovered true insights into the early years of the BBC, and the business and management pressures that it faced. This unique contribution to knowledge based on the 1928 edition of the *BBC Handbook* will now be compared with the results obtained from the editions representing other years, to identify changes over time, as part of a larger longitudinal research study.

Exercises and Discussion Questions

Based upon this example,

1. When is narrative inquiry useful as a research method?
2. What limitations regarding narrative inquiry would need to be considered?
3. Are there any obvious advantages of using the recursive abstraction technique to analyze this type of qualitative data?
4. Are there any obvious disadvantages of using the recursive abstraction technique to analyze

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this qualitative data?

5. When using recursive abstraction, what could you do to reduce researcher bias?

6. What are the validity issues that should be taken into account?

7. What are the reliability issues that should be considered?

8. Why is it important to check at the end of the recursive abstraction analysis to ensure that the findings obtained map correctly onto the original narrative?

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