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Insider Insights

Mini-disc Recorders: A New Approach for Qualitative Interviewing

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Abstract

In this article, the author discusses the benefits of digital audio recording on mini-disc for qualitative interviews. Some of these benefits include increased fidelity, longer recording time, and the ability to index recordings. The author concludes that even though mini-disc recorders are more expensive than cassette recorders, the benefits make the cost outlay worthwhile.

Keywords: audio, digital, technology, data collection

Introduction

The personal interview is one of the most commonly used methods in qualitative research. However, like many of my colleagues, I have often been plagued with the trials of equipment failure, and the scratchy results of using traditional cassette-recorders to capture participants' thoughts and feelings. Before embarking on my latest research grant (where I am exploring university faculty and librarians' perceptions of academic success), I purchased a Sony MZ-R900 mini-disc recorder. Having now completed more than 20 interviews, I have found so many advantages over traditional tape-recording that I will never go back — and would recommend mini-disc recorders to anyone gathering oral data.

Mini-disc recorder and desktop digital microphone – shown with a pen for size comparison.

First, mini-discs allow for high-quality audio even on 'slow-speed' recording. My recorder has three settings, allowing me to capture 80, 160 or 320 minutes on a single disc. I am currently using the 160-minute setting, which provides ample time for an in-depth interview

while retaining great sound quality. This also eliminates the need to change tapes during the interview — something I have always found to be a frustrating and distracting feature of tape-recorders. I have often spent time worrying about when to flip the tape, instead of focusing on the interviewee — not to mention losing valuable data when the participant talks right through the tape change. Participants always seem to make the most fascinating statements just when the tape needs to be flipped — and these statements are often lost during that process, or only reasonably captured in a field note at the close of the interview. With the option of longer recording time, the equipment fades into the background — allowing both the participant and the interviewer to focus on the task at hand, without interruption.

After each interview, I dub the mini-disc onto micro-cassette to hand over to my transcriptionist (unfortunately, the software possibilities for digital transcription remain limited, but are getting better). This also provides a backup of the original interview — which I always advise, in case the original disc is damaged or lost. A single cable connects the mini-disc recorder to my tape-recorder and I copy the file (in real-time, but silently) while I do other work. Due to the high quality of digital recording, I can copy to the slowest speed on the tape — so that a one-hour interview fits on one side of the tape, without losing quality. For interviews lasting longer than 60 minutes, an egg timer reminds me to flip the cassette. My transcriptionist has also been thrilled with the sound quality, resulting in quicker completion times, as there is little need to back-track to clarify statements made by the interviewees. The digital quality also helps to keep the project budget in check, as quicker transcription times equal lower costs — which balances the higher price that you'll need to pay for one of these recorders (more on that in a minute…).

There are many other advantages. First, mini-discs are far more reliable than tapes — I have not encountered one 'dud' disc and have yet to lose data due to tape failure (a problem I have encountered in the past). Second, the discs are not subject to degradation in the way that cassettes are — humidity, static electricity, magnets, and so on, don't affect mini-discs. And third, their small size (pre-packaged in cases of 5 discs) makes for easy long-term storage.

Each mini-disc is only 2 1/2" square and 3/16" thick.

However, the real perks are with the recorder itself. Though certainly more expensive than traditional tape recorders (i.e., up to $500Cdn — be sure to buy one with an external microphone jack), mini-disc recorders have many features that are useful for data analysis. The high-end models allow you to name the disc, and label up to 100 individual tracks on the recording (both during and after the interview). When I finish each interview, I title my disc with the participant's name and pseudonym (using only the latter on the back-up tapes that are sent for transcription), including the date of the interview. This title appears on the recorder's display window when the disc is inserted — and is particularly helpful when I mistakenly put a disc into the wrong case.

When the transcript is returned to me, I listen to the original recording in order to check for accuracy and to fill in any gaps noted by the transcriptionist. When the participant changes topics (or makes an insightful comment), I push a button to insert an index point (or "track mark") for further analysis. In the same way that each song on a music CD is marked as a "track", I am able to add marks at various points during the interview, and label these with descriptive names (e.g., thematic codes). I can also mark particular interview questions, so that locating responses is much quicker and easier than with traditional tapes. this is also useful for programming the player to put together tracks for playback where a participant discusses a specific issue at various times in the interview.

During analysis and writing, when I want to replay a selection from one person (e.g., to insert an audio track into PowerPoint), or when I would like to compare comments from two or three participants, there is no 'hit and miss' fast-forwarding through tapes — I simply scan through the track names on the recordings. This feature works particularly well when using other data analysis tools (e.g., NVivo) as it allows for simultaneous audio- and text-based review of each interview.

This fall, in the second phase of my study, I will make use of the mini-disc recorder again — this time, as I walk with undergraduate students around campus and get their views on campus life. The recorder is tiny (about the size of a deck of cards) so it will fit easily into the participant's pocket or on a belt, is not subject to 'wow and flutter' caused by jerky movement as tapes sometimes are, and provides several hours of recording time on its rechargeble battery. With the addition of a lapel microphone — and with no need to change tapes during the session — this will be a convenient way to gather data while we stroll around campus.