



Vrije Universiteit Brussel

Using Expert Interviews

researchICTafrica.net

Young Scholar Programme

4 September 2012, Port Louis

Leo Van Audenhove

SMIT Studies on Media, Information and Telecommunication

IBBT Interdisciplinary Institute on Broadband Technology



Outline

General

- Introduction
- Who is an expert?
- Why use expert interviews?
- Critiques
- Interview types
- Interaction types

Practical

- How do you select experts?
- How do you approach?
- How do you interview?
- How to use data?
- Why follow-up is important?



Introduction

- Used expert interviews over last 15 years
 - Based on reading on
 - Qualitative research
 - Informant interviews
 - Experience but not systematized or methodologically grounded
- Methodological literature
 - General literature on interviewing not really suitable
 - Scarce, only few articles available
 - One book (Bogner, Littig, Menz)
- This presentation
 - Based on own experience
 - Systematized on the basis of literature on method
 - ‘Recognized’ much of my own experience



Who is an expert?

- Expert according to Harrison (2001)
 - ‘elites’ that have access to high levels of information
- Expert according to Meuser & Nagel (2002)
 - Person who is responsible for the development, implementation or control of solutions/strategies/policies
 - Person who has privileged access to information about groups of persons or decision processes
- Broad definition
 - Broader than what we would use in daily life
 - E.g. medical doctors: expert on certain topics in their community
- Not neutral
 - Important for selection



Expert knowledge

- Three dimensions

- Technical knowledge → Lawyers, lobbyists,...

- Very specific knowledge in the field
 - Details on operations, laws, etc. influencing field

Often overlap

- Process knowledge → Policy makers, lobbyists, ...

- Info on routines, specific interactions, processes
 - Expert has knowledge as she/he is directly involved

- Explanatory knowledge → Scientists, retired policy makers

- Subjective interpretations of relevance, rules, beliefs
 - Ideas and ideologies and their inconsistencies
 - Interviewee him/herself and his/her routines/thoughts focus of interview



Why use expert interviews?

- For all parts of the policy cycle.
- Triangulation:
 - In combination with literature study, document analysis, etc.
 - To improve the quality of your data or as the main body of data.
- To get information you would not get otherwise.
 - **What do you want to know?**
 - What you can find in books?
 - What was in the newspapers?
 - **NO = waste of time for everyone.**
 - There should be an **added value**.



Critiques

- Negative
 - Information obtained not objective.
 - Setting of an interview can influence data. Reinforced by the interactive nature of expert interviews (in which interviewer participates), which are **rarely rigorously standardized**. Not repeatable.
 - Smaller set of data.
 - Possible flaws in the information provided by experts.
 - Danger of anecdotic information.
- Positive
 - Different views **broadens your own view on topic**: no black-and-white stories.
 - For factual information: double-check with experts setting out from diverging perspectives and with documents.
 - Aim of expert interviews is not to find inter-expert coherence *per se*.
 - Repeat if possible (for master thesis difficult).



Methodological defense

Bogner & Menz

- Argue for differentiation of expert interview types
 - Explorative expert interviews Technical knowledge
 - Systematizing expert interviews Process knowledge
 - Theory generating expert interviews Explanatory knowledge
- Argue for differentiation of 6 interaction types
 - Interviewer as co-expert
 - Interviewer as expert outside of field
 - Interviewer as lay person
 - Interviewer as authority
 - Interviewer as confederate
 - Interviewer as possible critic
- Argue in favor of interpreting interaction effects as part of data production



Interview types

Explorative expert interview

- When used
 - Used as first orientation in new fields
 - Better structuring of a problem
 - Used for preparing interview topic lists or surveys
- Interview preparation and practice
 - Can be very open and unstructured
 - Structure interviews on basis of basic topic list
 - No emphasis on comparability or aggregation of information
 - Topic lists can vary according to expertise interviewee



Interview types **example**

Explorative expert interview

- Internet filtering
 - Questions asked in this phase
 - What are the main themes of the debate?
 - What are the main problems?
 - Who are the main players?
 - Who would I interview?
 - Milton Mueller expert on internet governance
 - Fabienne Brison expert on intellectual property rights Europe
 - Tomas Lipinski expert on intellectual property rights US
 - Belgacom, Telenet and ISPA strategic cells
 - Companies producing filtering software (Philips, Audible Magic)
 - IFPI, MPAA strategic cells
 - EFF, etc.



Interview types

Systematizing expert interview

- When used?
 - Focus on exclusivity of expert knowledge
 - When person has gained expertise in praxis
 - Based on expertise or exclusive position
 - Used for information which otherwise not accessible
 - Focus on comparability and aggregation
- Interview preparation and practice
 - Focus on systematic and full disclosure of information
 - Open more detailed topic list
 - However allow for interviewee to answer extensively
 - Different interviews follow same trajectory to be able to compare and aggregate data.



Interview types **example**

Systematizing expert interview

- eEurope plus indicators
 - To what extent can survey methods used by the EC be used in the accession countries?
 - No knowledge available on very specific topic.
 - Interview with various research/survey companies/institutions in these countries.
- Interview Questions
 - How does carrying out surveys in accession countries differ from the rest of Europe?
 - What difficulties do you encounter when carrying out surveys?
 - How do you collect addresses and how do you select respondents?



Interview types

Theory generating interview

- When used
 - Interviewee more than information source
 - Focus on subjective aspects of experts knowledge
 - Focus on motives, routines, implicit beliefs impacting on functioning of experts and systems
- Interview preparation and practice
 - Questions focus on motives, beliefs, routines of experts
 - Often related to the function of experts less on knowledge
 - Open questions
 - but often part of systematizing interviews
 - Different interviews follow same trajectory to be able to compare and aggregate data.



Interview types **example**

Theory generating interview

- Epistemic groups in telecom reform
 - 80s-90s Telecom reform in North and South
 - In South supported by consultants from North
 - Background and experience in the North has impact on how they conceptualize problems.
- Interview questions
 - What are the general problems of telecoms in the South?
 - Are market reforms as carried out in the North a possible solution for the South?



Interaction types Framework

- Description on the basis of 7 characteristics
 - Dimension of typology
 - Communication during interview
 - Status of interviewer
 - Style of questioning
 - Advantages
 - Disadvantages
 - When used?



Interaction types

Interviewer as co-expert

- Dimension of typology
 - Knowledge level comparable
- Communication during interview
 - Symmetric, high level of interaction, many questions by expert
- Status of interviewer
 - Knowledge of terminology and field
- Style of questioning
 - Dialog, permanent questions, in depth questioning, intervening
- Advantages
 - High level of discussion and information generation
- Disadvantages
 - Remains within framework of field, technical details
- When used?
 - Explorative or systematizing
 - Facts and data oriented questions



Interaction types

Interviewer expert outside field

- Dimension of typology
 - Knowledge level of equal standing
- Communication during interview
 - Symmetric, high level of interaction, many questions by expert
- Status of interviewer
 - Knowledge of terminology and less of field
- Style of questioning
 - Dialog, permanent questions, in depth questioning, intervening
- Advantages
 - High level of discussion and information generation
 - High explanation of motives and orientation
- Disadvantages
 - Remains within framework of field, technical details
- When used?
 - Explorative or systematizing, facts and data oriented questions



Interaction types

Interviewer as lay person

- Dimension of typology
 - Low level of knowledge of the field
- Communication during interview
 - Asymmetric in favor of interviewee ⇨ monologue, paternalistic
- Status of interviewer
 - Low status of interviewer, low level of interest of interviewee
- Style of questioning
 - Broad questions which can generate longer answers
 - Naive subsequent questions
- Advantages
 - High level of confidence by interviewee ⇨ pressure to explain
- Disadvantages
 - Interviewer can not guide the interview
- When used?
 - Explorative interview, theory generating when focused on motives, norms



How do you select an experts?

- Explorative and systematizing interviews
 - Different actors, points of views involved
 - Different aspects or fields impacting issues
 - Use interviews to snow bal selection
 - Ask for other experts and fields involved
 - Ask for experts with similar or deviant views
 - E.g. Business modeling
 - Interview different actors in value chain
 - E.g. Evaluation of FP 5
 - Interview project manager, financial officer, EU responsible for project, etc.
- Theory generating interviews
 - Interviewees in the same group
 - Sharing a common background or function
 - Makes generalizing about specific group possible
 - E.g telecom consultants as an epistemological group



How do you select experts

- Do not necessarily go for the top shots
 - Sometimes have a good overview
 - BUT may lack expert knowledge on issues of interest
 - Are over committed and thus less time to commit
 - Experts on lower level might have much more detailed knowledge
- How to find them
 - Snowballing
 - Specialized literature review
 - Specialized conference reviews
 - Directly call companies (although mostly less successful)
 - Go through umbrella organizations



How do you approach?

- Are interviewees open to cooperate
 - Not uniform answer, but mostly positive
- Way you take up contact influences willingness
 - Approach actors only after first study of the field
 - Letter, eMail or Phone:
 - Explain what the goals, content and function of the research is
 - Convince by knowledge ⇨ detailed and well formulated mail
 - NOT: 'can we meet to talk', 'hi, I'm a first year student'
 - Explain own affiliation, client, background
 - In case of no response, ask again (phone)
 - Clearly fix time span in advance e.g. 45 min - 1 hour



How do you interview?

- Preparation
 - Become a quasi-expert
 - Only start after sound preparation
 - The younger you are, the better you have to prepare
 - Risk of sliding into lay person interview
 - Paternalistic non-disclosing attitude
- Interview guide or topic list
 - How to construct depends on type of interview
 - Basic open interview guide (main questions)
 - But also prepare some interjecting questions



How do you interview?

- Before starting the interview
 - Start with outlining goal and set up of research
 - Explain scope of the interview
 - Explain processing of information
 - Aggregation per type of actor or sector
 - No individual citation or individual citation, etc.
 - Explain how you will handle confidential information
 - Send written interview, text or text excerpts with citations
- To Record or Not to Record
 - Ask whether interviewee agrees with recording
 - Explain why you are recording
 - E.g. Only for own recollection, No direct citations, etc.
 - If interviewee not confident, don't record
 - Will otherwise impact on information gathering



How do you interview?

- Interacting during interview
 - Not important to stay 'neutral' as in qualitative interviews
 - Share some of your own knowledge, thoughts, insights
 - Will keep interviewee interested and balances positions
 - Methodologically not problematic
 - Expert is not easily influenced and is used to defend position
- Interaction depends on interaction type
 - As co-expert
 - Stimulate discussion, but leave enough room for open answers
 - Intervene when interviewee departs from subject
 - As critic
 - Intervene with more critical questions
 - Interview interaction types can be mixed
 - E.g. Start as co-expert and evolve towards critic
 - BUT never slip into conflicting positions
 - End with a 'cut the crap' section !!! STOP RECORDING !!!



How to use data?

- General remarks
 - Discourse and how views are expressed not important
 - What is thematically similar or different is important
 - Generalization, systematization
 - Explaining differences
- Transcription
 - Write out spoken text or paraphrase
 - No need to take into account non-verbal communication, pitch of voice, etc. (Not a narrative interview)
 - Transcribe only relevant parts
 - Leave sidetracks out
 - Transcription and summarization of less well structured phrases
 - Respect the flow of text but identify different themes and thoughts in separate paragraphs
 - BUT represent the full meaning of interviews



How to use data?

- Sensitive themes or sectors
 - Work in aggregated form
 - Use different interviews per type of actor
 - E.g. CDN in telecom: different interviews in different countries
 - Clearly indicate this BEFORE interview or brainstorm
- How to handle confidential information
 - Use for your own understanding
 - Use in aggregated form
 - (only if you do not disclose your sources)
 - State this in the methodological part



Why follow-up is important!

- Feedback
 - Important and often forgotten
 - Send email or letter to thank afterwards
 - Send report or synthesis at the end
 - State this before the interview
 - Creates a win-win situation
 - Makes it possible to go back ...
... without having to blush



Bibliography

- Bogner, A., Littig, B., Menz, W. (2005) (ed.) Das Experten-interview. Theorie, Methode, Anwendung, 2. Auflage, Wiesbaden, Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.
- Bogner, A., Littig, B., Menz, W. (2009) (ed.) Interviewing Experts. Palgrave.
- Dunn, W.N. (2004) Public Policy Analysis. An Introduction. Third Edition, New Jersey, Pearson, Prentice Hall.
- Flick, U. (2002) Qualitative Sozialforschung. Reinbeck, Rowohlt's Enzyklopädie.
- Froschauer, U., Lueger, M. (2003) Das qualitative Interview. Zur Praxis interpretativer Analyse sozialer Systeme. Wien, WUV, UTB.



Contact

- Leo Van Audenhove
 - Leo.Van.Audenhove@vub.ac.be
- Website
 - <http://smit.vub.ac.be/>