

# MEDIA ETHNOGRAPHY: THE CHALLENGES OF BREAKING DISCIPLINARY BOUNDARIES

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What does it mean to be an ethnographer? What does it take to do ethnography? Being an ethnographer involves immersing oneself in the unknown, and also in the familiar. It requires 'depth': by doing it, one gets to learn very much about a very small world. Ethnography is about richness of description, wealth of experience, elasticity of practice. It is about adopting a genre of writing that accompanies anthropological research methods and presents fieldwork in all its complexity. It is thus part of the method but it extends beyond it (Hartmann, 2006: 253). Ethnography is a philosophy. It is disputed, contested and embraced. Indeed, it is still fairly commonplace to hear that 'only anthropologists can claim to do real ethnography'. Adding to this rather incomplete compilation of elements and attributes, ethnography is about the everyday. Once the everyday became synonymous with the ubiquity of media presence and use, making us 'live in media' (Deuze, 2012), the anthropological study of media emerged, gained strength and some believe that it has now 'boomed'. Many of us, coming from various research traditions and fields, started to be media ethnographers and to do media ethnographies by immersing ourselves in, learning, experiencing, practising and writing them.

There is a widespread recognition of the different ways in which ethnographic approaches have contributed to and enriched the study of media, culture and society. However, researchers have also had to face the challenges of producing knowledge both at the margins and intersections of clearly (and sometimes not so clearly) demarcated disciplines, such as anthropology, media and internet studies, sociology, cultural and literary studies, to cite a few. In our Call for Papers, we posed questions such as: What are the constraints and opportunities created by media ethnography's inherent hybridity? To what extent can media ethnography be thought of and practised as an independent field? What is distinctive about the knowledge that is produced through an engagement with media ethnography? Our contributors responded with further stimulating questions, such as: How can we move away from 'virtual ethnographies conducted solely on the screen' to 'more integrated and complex multi-sited, multi-level and multi-platform arrangements'? (see Gómez Cruz and Ardévol in this issue) How can we define the locus of media practices in a media environment in which former boundaries between media and the ways we use them have collided or 'liquefied'? (see Picone in this issue). And how relevant are traditional ethnographic methods in studying internet-based phenomena in the context of journalism practice? (see Mabwezara in this issue).

Truly embracing the 'challenges of breaking disciplinary boundaries', the articles draw from a wide range of interdisciplinary approaches, such as sociology of journalism, new literacy studies, media production studies, photography and visual culture, communication sciences and social anthropology. The issue also offers a wide range of international perspectives, making use of original empirical research

conducted in countries from various corners of the world, such as India and Turkey (Ohm), Belgium (Picone), Spain (Gómez Cruz and Ardèvol), Kenya (Ekdale), Brazil (Holmes), Zimbabwe (Mabweazara) and the United Kingdom (Smith). Each article reflects on key (media) ethnographic tenets, characteristics and principles.

We start this new issue with a thought-provoking debate revolving around issues of reflexivity and researcher identity construction, which are further complicated by the rise of digital and social media. Exploring some of critical tensions concerning researcher identity in media production ethnographies, Brian Ekdale argues that 'ethnographer identity is interstitial, situated at the margins of contesting and, at times, divergent selves'. Importantly, identity here can be better understood as 'an act [rather] than an object'. Ekdale's open account of his fieldwork on community media organizations in Kibera and Mathare, two large slums in Nairobi, is likely to strike a chord with many of us who have attempted to 'manage' our own identities 'to privilege certain selves and favor particular agendas'. The author recalls how members of the community would describe him as a 'teacher, technical adviser, friend, and actor in their films', but seldom as a 'researcher'. His article is an eloquent reminder of how, as 'researchers', although the word does not seem very popular among research participants in his project, we are not 'the only ones who engage in the instrumental use' of our own identities. Rather, research participants also play an integral role in appropriating and promoting certain aspects of the researcher's identity to serve their own strategic purposes. Indeed, with digital media and new forms of relationship occurring beyond 'fieldwork' via social networking sites such as Facebook, for example, the boundaries between the two – research participants and researchers – become blurred as many new avenues are opened for participants to study the researcher.

Given that 'fieldwork' constitutes a practice that is located at the core of ethnography, an exploration of the concept of 'the field' becomes necessary in this issue. As Gupta and Ferguson put it, while it is taken for granted that 'fieldwork' is what 'makes one a real anthropologist', the idea of the 'field' 'remains largely unexamined' in contemporary anthropology (1997: 1–2). Edgar Gómez Cruz and Elisenda Ardèvol's article in this issue represents a welcome contribution to this debate as it reflects upon the concept of the 'field' in relation to ethnographies of digital technologies of communication in everyday life. The authors indicate that the 'field' should no longer be understood as merely 'the empirical instance of research', the place or the site (online or offline) where fieldwork is being carried out. Rather, 'the field' should be conceptualized as a network or 'as the summing up of the connections that the ethnographer traces between people, objects and places' (see Gómez Cruz and Ardèvol). The authors then engage in a discussion of their 'fieldwork' with the members of SortidazZ, a group of amateur photographers in Barcelona who use the photo-sharing platform Flickr. When doing so, they demonstrate the ways in which

'the practice approach' can be fruitful, not just as a theoretical approach, but also as a methodological tool, enabling us to grasp the mobility, connectivity and use of technologies involved in media and digital ethnographies.

Continuing this debate, Ike Picone explores the challenges facing the study of media practice in a media environment in which 'former boundaries between media and the ways we use them have collided or liquefied'. He asks: how can one define the locus of media practices when 'people dispose of an ever expanding and more mobile digital media repertoire through which they access content anytime, anywhere'? And how can one identify the spatial, temporal and social context through which media users float? Picone was confronted with these questions when setting up a semi-experimental digital ethnography as part of the Flemish E-publishing Trends – Fleet – interdisciplinary research project (see his article in this issue as well as his work elsewhere). The set-up is described as 'semi-experimental' because it builds on an ethnographic approach while still, to a certain extent, intervening in participants' daily routines. It is also inspired by the Living Lab methodology and Proxy Technology Assessments, 'where digital technologies are introduced in real-life settings and their use is then studied through qualitative, digital data-gathering methods'. By engaging in a sophisticated theoretical discussion and adopting innovative approaches, such as the Living Lab, his article sheds light on 'the continuous, self-reflexive balancing act during the research, between obtaining sound data and burdening the participants and between respecting the ground rules of ethnographic research and opening up towards new perspectives'.

The next contribution, by Britta Ohm, introduces the term 'the ethnographic moment' and challenges us to consider the seldom addressed temporal dimensions of our (media ethnographic) work. She reminds us that 'the challenge of breaking disciplinary boundaries ... concern not merely different disciplines' but also firm boundaries and deep contradictions within anthropology itself. On the one hand, the 'media revolution' and the media's ubiquity in our lives is recognized and celebrated. On the other hand, the larger discipline of anthropology continues to relegate media ethnographies and their theoretical advances to the 'emerging subfield' of media anthropology. To cite a passage from Ohm's article: 'the historically unequal relationship between anthropologist and object almost seems reified in the relationship between the discipline and new media-related ethnography: the latter is kept in some state of permanent postponement and temporal subordination'. Thus, she argues, we need to find new ways to think about and deal with temporality in media anthropology which are better suited to the ephemeral character not only of technology but also of mass-mediated contents. In this way, the author proposes that the notions of 'event' and 'debate' become prime markers of the momentary and the ephemeral in the production of mass-mediated reality. She then analyses the applications of 'event' and 'debate' in relation to her fieldwork on TV production landscapes in India and Turkey.

Hayes Mabweazara addresses a key concern which runs through this issue: the extent to which traditional ethnographic methods (such as observation, informal

conversations and in-depth interviews) are still relevant in studying internet-based phenomena in the context of media practice (he deals specifically with journalism practice in his article). By drawing on his ethnographic exploration of how Zimbabwean print journalists use the internet and its associated digital technologies, and by paying attention to the 'fluid and multifaceted nature of contemporary news production', the author offers a 'confidence boost' to researchers who deploy 'more traditional' ethnographic approaches to understand journalism practice in the digital era. His article offers a refreshing perspective by reassuring us that those traditional ethnographic methods can still yield valuable knowledge into how journalists work when appropriating digital technologies in the newsrooms. Mabweazara then discusses the opportunities (and challenges) involved in shifting between observing journalists online and offline as well as interviewing them in situ and outside the newsrooms. Reflecting on and describing the 'intuitive and creative' moments that characterized his ethnographic study, he advances the idea that ethnography 'is an adaptive self-reflexive lived experience negotiated between the researcher and the context of research'.

Having discussed the challenges and anxieties of producing knowledge at the margins and intersections of different disciplines, the issue then moves to the opportunities that this interdisciplinarity can offer us. We conclude this conversation about media ethnography on a positive note offered by Tori Holmes. She adapts and develops methodological concepts and approaches from different traditions, such as anthropology, new literacy studies and internet studies. Holmes takes us through how she 'followed the content' to explore how residents of Rio's favelas 'were representing their neighbourhoods in public internet content, and the significance of these user-generated representations for their understandings of the city'. Therefore, this incorporation and adaptation of approaches from different fields is precisely what makes it possible to go beyond the obstructive 'divide between research into texts (within literary and cultural studies) and research into practices (within the social sciences), as well as the unhelpful choice which is often presented between 'following the content' and 'following the people'.

Finally, outside of the theme of this issue, we also have an article by Paul Smith, which analyses the application of competition regulation to UK television broadcasting in the areas of mergers and acquisitions, monopoly and market dominance, cartels, state aid and public service broadcasting. The difficulty of applying competition law principles to the television industry as well as the political nature of the process emerge as key issues in his work.

In conclusion, media ethnography's 'breaking of disciplinary boundaries' is inherent to producing fresh knowledge. Whether 'doing' or 'being inspired by' ethnography, we are confronted by a constant search for insights, ideas and answers from familiar, but also often from unfamiliar disciplinary territories. The articles in this issue have boldly

taken on such challenges, approaching media ethnography from various original angles. Some of the contributions have eased our apprehensions, others have raised further concerns, and all have opened up new lines of enquiry, demonstrating that exciting times lie ahead for those of us engaging with media ethnography.

## REFERENCES

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