



## Cultural Studies Review

Vol. 24, No. 2  
2018



© 2018 by the author(s). This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0) License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), allowing third parties to copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format and to remix, transform, and build upon the material for any purpose, even commercially, provided the original work is properly cited and states its license.

**Citation:** Sinanan, J. 2018. A history of the convergence of ethnography, cultural studies and digital media. *Cultural Studies Review*, 24:2, 181-183. <https://doi.org/10.5130/csr.v24i2.6316>

ISSN 1837-8692 | Published by UTS ePRESS | <http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/journals/index.php/csrj/index>

## BOOK REVIEW

# A History of the Convergence of Ethnography, Cultural Studies and Digital Media

**Jolynna Sinanan**

University of Sydney

**Corresponding author:** Jolynna Sinanan, John Woolley Building, The University of Sydney, Camperdown NSW 2006, [jolynna.sinanan@sydney.edu.au](mailto:jolynna.sinanan@sydney.edu.au)

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5130/csr.v24i2.6316>

**Article History:** Received 03/04/2018; Revised 19/07/2018; Accepted 20/07/2018; Published 28/11/2018

It is rare to be part of a scholarly movement from its early days, when its theoretical and empirical directions are still developing, let alone observe its unfolding trends, challenges and innovations with close reflection and attention to detail such as Anna Christina Pertierra does in this remarkable volume. *Media Anthropology for the Digital Age* reflects Pertierra's unique experience working with influential scholars in media and digital anthropology and confirms her own substantial contributions to these fields.

Pertierra is an anthropologist by training. She sets the scene with opening vignettes from her extensive fieldwork in the Philippines and Cuba that capture human experiences that are often lost in more theoretical or abstract scholarship on media. The volume is grounded in a sensibility that reminds lay readers and scholars alike that although we may think about and analyse media consumers as collective audiences, these audiences are made up of individuals embedded in a variety of contexts who may not necessarily see themselves as having much in common.

Pertierra's main aim is not to critique or contribute to debates about media, anthropology or ethnographic methods but to provide insight into how the social anthropology of media has influenced other fields. Much anthropological scholarship is written by anthropologists for other anthropologists who study the same region or social phenomena. Indeed, Pertierra is a scholar of the Caribbean and Latin America who has worked alongside other influential Caribbeanists but, in an era of globalised media, one cannot study either a region or a technology in isolation. It is not possible, for instance, to study television without considering external infrastructures of access or service provision whether by state governments or private corporations. Similarly, one cannot study the use of mobile phones by individuals living in an isolated rural village without considering that the people they most frequently call or message

**DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTEREST** The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article. **FUNDING** The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

are relatives living in industrialised cities overseas. Pertierra treats digital technologies as global media and considers emerging researchers in digital media as global scholars. Written in a highly accessible style, the book is more ambitious than a beginners' guide yet never assumes extensive background knowledge.

The book provides a comprehensive account of how scholarship in media anthropology, digital anthropology and digital ethnography arrived at the point it is now. Drawing on her expertise in social anthropology, media and cultural studies, Pertierra gives succinct explanations of how key figures have influenced the field. She revisits texts that are often considered foundational and others that have not yet received global acknowledgement for their notable theoretical insights or empirically based arguments around the uses of digital media. While many will be familiar with the work of Giddens, Appadurai and Urry, the dialogue she sets up between their ideas and the in-depth ethnographies conducted by Kottak, Larkin and Spitulnik are novel and compelling illustrations of how peripheral and what are often thought of as parochial sites can bring into question assumptions that are presumed to be universal. The argument for drawing on in-depth ethnographic inquiry to investigate uses of media and the meanings they hold in people's lives is rooted in anthropology's commitment to cultural relativism. Not only are all cultures equally valid and worthy of respectful, deep consideration but local research can expose what is taken for granted as mainstream or normative. Thus a study on uses of Facebook in Trinidad might reveal more about lived relationships and relationships to social media than a study of Facebook amongst college students in Silicon Valley.

The middle section of the book is given over to discussing the 'ethnographic turn' in media studies, with space given to Sun's exemplary work on media and modernity in China. Pertierra argues that using ethnography to investigate media cultures allows for deeper engagement with media sub-cultures and groups based on collective identification such as fandom communities. Here Pertierra draws on her expertise with Latin American media studies to effectively argue that the alignment between cultural studies and ethnographic methods can produce more nuanced understanding of the relationships between popular culture and issues of class, individual and collective forms of identification, future aspirations, cultural and family values. These themes have long held the interest of anthropologists and a newly sharpened focus on media, and specifically digital media, presents another means to better understand the tensions, continuities and divergences that exist within different groups. Mobile and social media, in particular, provide effective tools for ethnographers to explore mobility, sociality and intimacies as they consolidate and transform within the digital context.

To establish the impact of social and digital media on different cultures globally and on scholarship in media, Pertierra revisits internet studies and ethnographies of the internet that argued that for certain communities the 'virtual' and the 'real' are indistinguishable in terms of everyday experiences and navigating relationships, such as the work of Miller and Slater, Coleman and Boellstorff. While this argument can seem fairly rote in 2018, the ethnographic emphasis on digital, mobile and social media as emplaced, relational and intertwined with social and material contexts is worth celebrating, especially when we recall how much of the internet scholarship of the late 1990s and early 2000s were based on assumptions that 'cyber' or 'virtual' realities were another kind of reality that threatened to erode more authentic forms of lived experiences.

The closing chapters of the book consolidate the role of media practices in current media scholarship, where anthropologists and ethnographers draw on the affordances provided by digital media to produce media for educative purposes or to enhance media inquiry itself in

a case of the research object becoming the research tool. These chapters highlight the many contributions that Australian-based researchers and centres have made in international scholarship through critically cultivating the relationship between cultural studies, media and digital anthropology.

In a final extended discussion of ethnography, Pertierra attempts to put to rest one of the main grievances between anthropologists and interdisciplinary scholars who employ ethnographic methods, namely the requirement for time spent in the field and the authority that accrues to having 'been there'. To Pertierra this particular scholarly stand-off misses the point as why media research turned to the methodologies of anthropology in the first place. Media is intertwined with almost every aspect of everyday life, from routine micro-coordination between family members in the home to the portability of entertainment and communication. Therefore, the study of media, needs methodologies attuned to investigating lived worlds. Ethnography, she argues, is the principle of engaging with people's diverse experiences of the world, not a prescribed set of methods. This point in itself could form the basis of a follow-up volume on the impact of the digital age on anthropology.

As a history of intellectual convergence, *Media Anthropology for the Digital Age* captures over a hundred years of anthropology, fifty years of mass media, audience and reception studies, and a decade of scholarship on emergent social and digital media. Those working in these fields will find this volume a useful resource for undergraduate and postgraduate students especially as it provides a curated knowledge bank of recommended readings for anyone interested in everyday uses and meanings of digital media.

### About the author:

Jolynna Sinanan is a Research Fellow in Digital Media and Ethnography at the University of Sydney. Her books include *Social Media in Trinidad* and *Visualising Facebook and Webcam* (with Daniel Miller).