

Media ethnography for busy people: Introducing students to the ethnographic approach in media-related syllabi

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Abstract

Teaching the ethnographic approach is a challenging effort in higher education due to the increasing time constraints that characterize current academia. A debate about how to teach ethnography is therefore particularly urgent. As a contribution to foster this debate, this article presents and discusses a practical exercise, first tested at the SuSo 2015 Summer School. The method is based on taking pictures of media practices, texts and technologies in public spaces. The mediation of the camera allows students to engage with the field and to experiment with the 'denaturalizing' vision that generally characterizes ethnographic approaches to media use and consumption. This reflexive stance is further fostered by a classroom discussion on the practice of observation and on the materials produced. In this way, the exercise aims at an acceptable compromise between the reduced time available for teaching and the advantages of allowing students to personally experience the practicalities of method.

Keywords: pedagogy, media ethnography, visual ethnography, photography, denaturalization

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1 Introduction

Ethnography as a research method has a long and well-established tradition within media studies. Pioneering works on media production, one of the two main strands of ethnographic empirical research in the field, date back to the 1950s (see in particular Powdermaker, 1950). Since the 1970s, these studies have resulted in an uninterrupted line of inquiry, feeding especially into the subfields of journalism studies (Shudson, 1989; Cottle, 2000; Tuchman, 2002) and, more recently, into political communications studies (Spitulnik Vidali/Allen Peterson, 2012).

Ethnographic research on audiences and media users dates to the 1980s (Livingstone, 2006), a time when scholars started to address media reception through ethnography-inspired approaches (see, for example, Morley, 1980, Radway, 1984). Several authors have questioned the soundness of the categorization of “ethnographic studies” (Nightingale, 1993; Coman/Rothenbuhler, 2005) for these early works, due to their limited time of engagement with the field. Since the early 1990s, however, the direct observation of the household as an everyday context of media consumption and use has become a tenet of audience studies (Moores, 1993).

While the epistemological premises and theoretical implications of media ethnography still remain controversial (Algan, 2009), the approach seems to have been steadily accepted within the canon of media studies. On the one hand, in fact, the ongoing methodological debate on media ethnography is systematic and lively. In recent years, researchers have strived to adjust their ethnographic approaches to meet the new challenges posed by the evolving transformation of our media environments by experimenting with those new ways of engaging the field that had been first adopted within the neighbouring fields of social and anthropological ethnography. The present call for a ‘sensory ethnography’ of media practices (Pink et al., 2008; Pink, 2015), or the attempts to revamp cultural audience studies’ empirical understanding in order to address media usage in ‘urban public spaces’ (Tosoni, 2015; Tosoni/Ridell, 2016) are just two of many examples. On the other hand, the media ethnographic approach is also the object of an equally sustained effort of systematization and institutionalization. It is being granted increasing attention in handbooks, methodological manuals and teaching textbooks that introduce students to the field of media studies (e.g., Jensen, 2002, ed.; Baxter/Babbie, 2003; Berger, 2011; Wimmer/Dominick, 2013), and media-related curricula and courses in higher education.

Still the current process of institutionalization of ethnography seems to be lacking a sustained disciplinary discussion about the actual practices of teaching media ethnography. Indeed, due to the characteristics of the ethnographic method, media ethnography pedagogy poses specific challenges that are not

sufficiently addressed by existing manuals and textbooks. These introductions to media ethnography often address theoretical and practical issues such as the complexity of developing a proper ethnographic sensibility, the difficulties that may be encountered in engaging with the field, or the plurality of methodological frameworks that may guide the process of observation. However, this scholarship rarely discusses how to address these issues in an effective way within practical teaching situations, given all the constraints and limitations that are typical of working with students in the classroom.

In this chapter we wish to enhance the debate regarding media ethnography pedagogy. We see this debate as an indispensable contribution to a more general effort of rethinking media curricula – an undertaking that several scholars consider to be urgent (Alvarado, 2009) in the present phase of disciplinary development. We will first address some of the main challenges of teaching media ethnography, with a particular focus on the problem of *time*. Coming to grips with the ethnographic approach requires an amount of time that is generally unavailable within higher education – particularly for syllabi that feature media ethnography but are not exclusively focused on it. We will then present a case study of our own teaching experience at the SuSo 2015 Summer School. The final section of the chapter is dedicated to some remarks on teaching media ethnography.

2 Teaching media ethnography with time constraints

The present discontinuous debate on media ethnography pedagogy mainly revolves around issues related to teaching the method in non-humanist curricula - and particularly within computer science courses, being the approach most often used to improve software design (e.g., Weinberg/Stephen, 2002; Brown et al., 2011). A more general pedagogical debate can be found only in the broader fields of social and anthropological ethnography. Thanks in particular to the editorial efforts of specialized journals such as *Teaching Anthropology*, scholars in these fields are discussing broader issues related to tutoring and teaching in real situations. For example, Carol McGranahan (2014) has presented interesting reflections on teaching an ethnographic sensibility in undergraduate courses with more than 100 students each, where it is not possible to engage in fieldwork. In contrast, Hubert Bastide (2011) addresses the challenges and opportunities of the Oxford tutorial system, in which students are taught in groups of one to three. Willow Sainsbury (2012), in turn, deals with teaching technicalities such as the potentialities (and limitations) of using anecdotes within the pedagogy of ethnography. We will draw on this ongoing

discussion in order to address the pedagogy of (media) ethnography in real teaching situations, focusing on one of the most common problems in higher education: lack of time.

Time is a crucial resource, both for ethnographic research itself and for teaching students how to conduct such research. For both the researcher and the student, the experience of media ethnography fieldwork is based on taking a reflexive place in space and time, and on developing social relations with other subjects in a process that should ultimately result in understanding. As summarized by Harry F. Wolcott (2004): “*Fieldwork takes time. Does that make time the critical attribute of fieldwork? According to ethnographic tradition, the answer is yes.*”

In contemporary academia, however, we live increasingly “hurried lives” (Davis, 2013). Funding bodies seek quick completion of projects and may see ethnographies as unlikely to satisfy “value for money” criteria (Jeffery/Troman 2004). Time is becoming an increasingly scarce research resource under the “publish or perish” regime. However, an appropriate length of time (Brown et al., 2007) is required for the teaching of ethnography. As with any other practical skill, gaining expertise in how to take a “reflexive place in space and time” within a specific social field – and how to conduct theoretically driven observations from this position – requires a long first-hand process. This is so even when this process occurs under the guidance and tutoring of an experienced researcher. However, large groups of students and the increasing streamlining of higher education work against the possibility of any long-term teaching approaches, in both graduate and post-graduate settings (Giroux, 2002).

Social sciences have long since acknowledged the critical relevance of these issues, prompting a methodological rethinking of the temporal “regimes” of the ethnographic approach. For example, Bob Jeffrey and Geoff Troman (2004) have elaborated on different temporal modalities for ethnographic research, ranging from *compressed* to *intermittent* and on to *recurrent* time modes. Understanding ethnography as something that can be (and is) done in different time modes makes it easier to combine its instruction with the conditions and structures of contemporary academia. In the same vein, scholars have proposed and experimented with less time-consuming forms of field exposure. Although differently labelled – examples include “Blitzkrieg Ethnography” (Rist, 1980), “Rapid Ethnography” (Millen, 2000), “Focused Ethnography” (Knoblauch, 2005) and “Short Term Ethnography” (Pink/Morgan 2013) – all these methodological reconsiderations rely on a narrower and more intense form of observation. In this sense, media ethnography can be seen as a form of “focused ethnography”, in which only specific media-related practices of a specific social field are addressed by the researcher, so that the total time in the field can be shortened (Bolin, 1998).

The narrower focus of media ethnography undoubtedly provides an advantage in teaching the method. However, more elaboration is still needed on how to do so within the short time frames that are available in many higher education settings. The proposal that will be discussed in the next section, derived from our own experience at the European Media and Communication Doctoral Summer School, is based on two key pedagogical tools: the use of photography, and guided classroom discussion on camera-mediated observations.

3 Experiences from the European Media and Communication Doctoral Summer School

We first experimented with our pedagogical approach to media ethnography in August 2015, during a joint teaching experience at the European Media and Communication Doctoral Summer School in Bremen. Later, we fine-tuned this approach in our own regular classes (undergraduate and graduate).

The European Media and Communication Doctoral Summer School (SuSo), launched in 1992, is a yearly event supported by the European Communication Research and Education Association (ECREA) and by a consortium of 21 European universities, each contributing one lecturer to the programme. At SuSo, in contrast to many other summer schools, the main task of these lecturers is not to lecture; rather, they provide support to the participants in their PhD trajectories. The main part of the summer school is hence doctoral student feedback sessions, in which students present their dissertations and get feedback from each other and from senior academics. Furthermore, great emphasis is placed on workshops that address practical research issues.

At the summer school of 2015, we arranged a workshop on ethnography. The time frame for these workshops was a maximum of about two to three hours, and there was no time for any lengthy preparation by students. Furthermore, the students' knowledge about ethnographic fieldwork varied widely, depending on which research tradition dominated their universities and on their national variant of the multi-disciplinary field of media and communication studies. Some students were already using ethnography in their PhD projects, and thus already possessed specialized and deep knowledge of the approach. Others had very shallow knowledge of it. Teaching ethnography in this setting was therefore very challenging.

In planning the workshop, we started with the need for a practical exercise that was possible to complete in a short timeframe without any previous experience of ethnography, but that would still be fruitful for the subsequent guided discussion in the classroom. For this we assigned to our approximately 20 graduate students the task of documenting their surroundings (at the Bremen

university campus) using mobile phone photography, and of focusing their visual attention on media in public places. We instructed the group to take photographs of media practices, technologies and texts seen in public – and to then bring these photographs to class. The seminar itself contained a brief introduction to (visual) ethnography that provided some key concepts, followed by a structured discussion, first in smaller groups and then as a whole group.

Using visual ethnography in this way, and more specifically using photography, turned out to be practical and fruitful in several ways. Firstly, most people have a camera in their mobile phone, and taking photographs in public places does not require much time. Secondly, the materials collected in this way are suitable for a common discussion that can easily be guided to focus on two main topics: the phenomena observed, and some of the central and difficult problems of ethnography – including issues of epistemology, ethics and the practicalities of observations in the field. The most relevant characteristic of this kind of ethnographic discussion is that it is grounded in actual, practical experience and not only in readings based on the experiences of other people. In our opinion, it is of the utmost importance, even in hurried academic situations, to facilitate a practical dimension when teaching methodology of any kind.

Beyond these general points, however, we consider our pedagogical proposal to be particularly apt in conveying a sense of a key feature of the craft of (media) ethnographic research: the adoption of a specific form of “ethnographic vision”.

4 Ethnographic vision and the question of denaturalization

In many ways, ethnography is about *seeing* things in a certain way, as emphasized by *I Swear I Saw This*, the title of a book about the ethnographic craft written by the anthropologist Michael Taussig (2011). With Brown et al. (2007, p. 424), therefore, “*we would liken the process of learning ethnography to that of learning to see*”: In other words, teaching ethnography is about training students in what can be labelled an ethnographic vision.¹

This process of “learning to see” has several dimensions. First, it involves discerning what to focus on in the field. In this sense, vision is tightly intertwined with theory and theoretical foci. When teaching ethnography, it is thus essential to give students a problem or theoretically motivated question to work with as they experiment with fieldwork. This is vital for their observations to be in any way fruitful. In our case, as stated earlier, we asked students to document media practices, technologies and texts in public places. Beyond this level, ethnographic vision also has to do with openness, concentration and

¹ This same stance applies of course also to the other senses.

attention to detail. The use of photography helps with all of these things. The task – to find artefacts, people and practices to photograph – provides students with a new way of relating to the world and a new way of looking at it.

A second crucial issue when teaching ethnography, and especially media ethnography, is the question of “going native” versus adopting a (critical) distance from the social settings observed by the ethnographer. In traditional (anthropological) ethnography, this issue has been described as a dialectical process. In the first phase, the researcher, thrown into the field, must first “go native” in order to achieve closeness, and an inside understanding of the field and its actors, thus becoming part of it in a way. The second phase consists of reflexive distancing, which is both a precondition and a result of the ethnographer’s critical reflection and analysis. When it comes to ethnographic works in media studies, especially works on media engagements and uses, “going native” seems to be held as less of a concern, since from the outset the researcher is already close to – or even a part of – the social settings under observation. On the contrary, the main issue is to achieve an appropriate reflexive stance on the social worlds in question, so that their dynamics and contradictions – their meanings – become apparent.

This process, which consists of questioning that which otherwise would be taken for granted and assumed to be normal or natural, can be labelled “denaturalization”. Photography is a useful tool for this purpose, since the very act of watching the world through a photographic lens and taking a picture is a way of seeing things in a different light. In our exercise, the reflexivity fostered by the photographic gaze was further fostered by the subsequent discussion and comments made in the classroom, helping students to understand and experience first-hand the process of denaturalization. This pedagogical process can be exemplified by some of the debates that arose during the seminar.

One of the liveliest discussions concerned the very *act* of taking photographs. The students not only debated the epistemological nature of the knowledge produced by this practice, but also how the act of taking pictures of social situations in public – mostly of strangers using their personal media technologies – revealed several norms about how to use mobile phones and mobile phone cameras in public. Several students described the awkwardness they experienced when transgressing these implicit rules about how to behave in public.

Another related discussion focused on how the photographs themselves made *norms* about photography *visible*. Students reported their attempts to compromise between taking photographs without being seen, doing it quickly and discretely, and trying to create understandable visual information. This conversation helped them to bring forth and discuss the underlying cultural norms, understandings and visual aesthetics of what constitutes appropriate photography.

However, the denaturalization fostered by our exercise did not only concern the students' personal media practices of taking pictures in public spaces. The same reflexive stance was experienced in students' observations of physical space, people and media practices in the field. Paying close attention to details in public spaces, such as stickers, graffiti, posters and other forms of "guerilla" or alternative media, created new understandings and experiences for several of the students. The groups spoke about the changing nature of this alternative media landscape in different locations in the city (in particular, the university campus and downtown areas) and how the city was divided into various symbolic, cultural, political and aesthetic zones that had not been obvious to the students, but that became visible through the ethnographic vision stimulated by the exercise.

Even more telling were the discussions about less visible media, such as open WiFi networks, surveillance cameras and the infrastructure of public electrical plugs which enables and delimits the public use of media, and ultimately structures the movements of people in the cityscape. This *infrastructure* is in no way obvious; students' understanding of these structuring infrastructures resulted from an ethnographic gaze that was enhanced by the push to take photographs to document media practices in public spaces.

In addition to these barely visible yet structuring materialities, *non-obvious cultural meanings* were revealed and debated during the seminar. One reflection that emerged after observing and photographing people using their smartphones in public was the very uniformness of mobile use as a bodily practice: how the thumb moves repeatedly up and down over the screen. Students observed how this bodily practice much resembles the handling of prayer beads within religious practices, as the thumb moves between beads in an act of prayer and meditation. This reflection, which developed from a denaturalizing view of a familiar and taken-for-granted practice, led to discussions of how to interpret mobile phone use and what such usage stands for.

5 Conclusion

The pedagogical exercise we have proposed and discussed does not aim to be an all-encompassing strategy for teaching media ethnography. As it is based on camera-mediated experimentation with a denaturalizing vision, this strategy may be, for example, less sound for teaching ethnographic approaches that aim to gain an understanding of specialized practices through "participant comprehension" (Collins, 1984), particularly of media production. However, this exercise is flexible enough to cover a vast array of key issues within the ethnographic craft. The classroom discussion, based on students' first-hand experiences, can be profitably used to stress and bring forth issues related both to

the observation of the field and, reflexively, to the observation of the researcher engaged in the field. Moreover, the limited time required by the exercise makes it an acceptable way to deal with the temporal constraints in current higher education practices.

The urgency we attribute to joining our colleagues in social and anthropological ethnography in a common debate on this kind of teaching practice must not be misunderstood as the acceptance of the present pedagogical status quo in higher education. Rather, it is at best a way of coping with the present problematic situation and, notwithstanding the unfavorable circumstances, dealing with the effort of training new generations of media scholars and ethnographers.

6 References

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