

A photograph of a person's hands holding a smartphone up to take a picture of a small, patterned object on a table. The image is overlaid with a semi-transparent blue filter. The person's arms and hands are visible, and a watch is on their left wrist. The background shows a table and some other objects, but they are out of focus.

Media Practice and Everyday Agency in Europe

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Analysing Media Production: The Benefits and Limits of Using Ethnographic Methodology¹

Rosa Franquet

1. Introduction

I would like to stress, as different authors have done before, the importance of studying audiovisual production in the context of technological convergence. As Puijk (2008: 29) puts it: “Media organizations have changed radically in the last decennium. Increased competition and technological developments have given an impetus toward new production modes, changes in organizational structures and ways of thinking about the readers and viewers”. These transformations were centred on the emergence of the internet and the development of online content has brought renewed interest in ethnographic studies of media production.

The study of production can be approached from different angles and with different methodologies, but by using ethnographic techniques such as field observation we obtain essential knowledge about the transformations that are occurring. Through observation and interviews, we can understand how companies adapt their organisations to digitalised production environments, and new forms of consumption and audience requirements.

Researchers have systematically studied the production dynamics of the media and have generated a large number of case studies, mostly in the area of news production. Since the mid-nineties, and the popularisation of the internet, there has been a proliferation of studies of online news production in broadcasting organisations. The relatively high degree of work division in news production has facilitated its systematic study.

2. Ethnographic approaches

One early example of the use of ethnographic studies for the analysis of news production was a comparative study conducted by a group of researchers from two Spanish universities (the UCM and the UAB)² in 1985. In that early study

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we analysed the news production of the main Spanish radio and television news services. The aim was to gain insights into news production processes during the three production phases: the moment when a news story is collected, the phase when sources are chosen and the moment of broadcasting and presentation to the audience.

This pioneer research in Spain spawned a book entitled “Making news: The production routines of radio and television”, which was related to both previous “gate keeper-studies” (White, 1950; Breed, 1955) and “newsmaking-studies” (Tuchman, 1978; Schlesinger, 1980; Schlesinger, 1987). This research focused on radio and television news production processes. The purpose was to understand the organisational structures and practices in the workplace. In the research, we followed the path of ethnography and carried out field observation in newsrooms, content analysis, and a series of in-depth interviews. We opted for participant observation because it enabled us to study the production phenomenon in the context in which it actually happens and thus understand all of the complexities of news production.

Three years later, we conducted another study into the production of current affairs programs. This new study compared the data obtained three years earlier with the new data found in new participant observations, content analyses and in-depth interviews. The idea was to analyse the differences between male and female reporters with regard to news stories, and the main goal was to understand how gender affects journalist practices and perceptions. These early studies revealed the strengths, but also the weaknesses, of the ethnographic methodology and constituted the starting point for new approaches to the study of audiovisual production. These advantages and disadvantages have also been identified and discussed by other authors (Schlesinger, 1980; Paterson and Domingo, 2008; Erdal, 2007; Erdal, 2009; Merrigan and Huston, 2009; Tracy, 2013).

Among the advantages of using ethnography, some are specific to fieldwork itself, as they make it possible to gather a large amount of original, first-hand information and to be personally involved with the subjects we are studying, thus providing in-depth knowledge of the phenomenon being analysed. However, short observation periods may be a limitation of ethnography, and distortion can be caused by the presence of a researcher in the environment.

In 2002 and 2003, we analysed how the Catalan language media adapted to the changes resulting from technological innovation. We studied the creation of online divisions and their integration into the structure of media companies. The reorganisation of press, radio and television campaigns when they first started dealing with the internet tended to generate “ad hoc” divisions whereby online activity was, in general terms, disassociated from the traditional production structures. This was how radio and television operators responded to the

emergence of the internet, and what compelled them to adapt their activity to multimedia production as it became more and more prominent and strategically important (Jakubowicz, 2007).

We worked from the hypothesis that “Online media, because of their economic, technical and aesthetic characteristics, are more permeable than conventional media to new sources of news, new subjects of journalistic interest, new protagonists and new treatments of news” (Franquet et al., 2006). The methodology once again involved ethnographic techniques. As suggested by Erdal: “[A]n important reason for using qualitative methods in the study of production news is related to their capacity to provide hypotheses, searching for unknown organizations and produce theories” (2008: 38).

Studies of media production have used ethnographic methods to obtain data and knowledge that is hard to obtain by using other analytical techniques. The appearance of new interactive digital media in the 1990s aroused the interest of researchers, who once again used ethnography to study internet based applications such as news sites, weblogs and wikis, as well as computer-mediated communication (CMC) (email, forums, instant messaging, chat rooms, social networks, etc.). The study of the production multiplatform content at the heart of broadcasting companies is a real challenge for researchers, who have to analyse this process inside a dynamic and complex organisation (Franquet et al., 2012).

The ethnographic approach was once again an ideal tool for analysing the transformation from a traditional single-platform newsroom to one that produces multiplatform news content “in continuum”. Ethnographic methodology allowed us to understand the transformations that were happening and prevented us from falling into the trap of technological determinism.

The research used methodological triangulation involving field observation, content analysis and qualitative interviews to study integrated media organisations: “Triangulation is a process of using perceptions to clarify meaning and identify different ways of seeing a phenomenon. A number of convergence studies have triangulated methods to enrich the understanding of this complex change” (Singer, 2008: 165).

We were experienced in the use of ethnological methodology and knew about the news production process in a broadcasting organisation prior to the arrival of the internet. Our research tradition helped us to determine which organisations to study, how to define units of analysis, to establish observation times, etc., but most of all to interpret the data collected from our fieldwork and to understand the new activities being undertaken by professionals working for news websites. The use of ethnography to study news production allows us to extract elements for consideration in order to establish the advantages and disadvantages of the ethnographic method and its development from an analogue production environment to the new ecosystem of online production.

3. Facets of studying multiplatform content production

With the change in production conditions derived from the shift from analogue to digital systems, ethnographic techniques were faced with new challenges in analyses of online news production. In the multiplatform production context, professional routines are less formalised because they are still being constituted. In the ongoing process of convergence, multiplatform productions proliferate in order to make company assets profitable. Some productions involve, as a special feature, the integration of digital content management systems (Jeffery-Poulter, 2002).

In addition, the placing of workers in different offices and departments, uninterrupted production, etc., present new challenges for observations. The researcher also has to collect and analyse a considerable amount of material. Moreover, at present, the analysis of cross-media content is posing new difficulties. It is precisely the high complexity and the status of being a universe in construction that makes ethnography the ideal method for the analysis of a specific universe and its members during the negotiation and interaction processes.

Methodological triangulation helps to reduce the difficulties arising from the complexity of the new situation. So, despite the fact that the phenomenon was new, content analysis enabled us to obtain information about online publication in the truest sense, about the ways in which news discourses are articulated in the media and about the relationship with formal, aesthetic and technical aspects.

On the other hand, certain multiplatform comparative studies using ethnographic techniques need teamwork and these studies require a great deal of effort to coordinate the different researchers doing the same job in different organisations at the same time. These difficulties can obviously be overcome with well-unified criteria, the creation of accurate observation guides and a preliminary test to eliminate any dysfunctions from the system and unify the competences of all the researchers involved.

3.1. The interview as a successful technique

Interviews are a highly effective technique in qualitative research, and are also one of the most widely used. Interviews provide information about aspects of a situation that are not directly observable, and are therefore a fundamental tool for researchers. Depending on the objectives that we have set for our research, we can use different degrees of structure in interviews. The researcher should choose what type of interview they are going to use depending on the data being

sought: an open, structured or semi-structured interview. In the latter case, a list of guideline questions should be prepared on the topic, but these should also be complemented and adapted throughout the course of the conversation.

The researcher believes, when approaching this technique for the first time, that defining the questions to be answered is enough. If opting for an open interview, certain themes are defined and in a more or less structured interview, more or less open questions are defined. A documentation study should be made beforehand to help guide the selection of themes, and to choose the right interviewees.

From the first interview, however, the researcher often starts realising that it is not quite so easy and that they will not always obtain the information required in consonance with the objectives established for the research. Although we cannot go into every aspect of the use of interviews, we will highlight some of the difficulties or limitations that may be encountered.

First of all, there are limitations related to access to the subjects chosen for the interviews, the key informants. Depending on our background knowledge, we decide which people to interview, but they are not always available or are not the ones who can, or are willing to, give us the information we need. Secondly, the interviewee might not have the time we need, or might not be willing to follow the pre-established script and start drifting into areas that are irrelevant to our purposes. Thirdly, there are limitations related to confidentiality. Sometimes, the interviewee asks not to be identified or there are things they ask to be kept “off the record”.

These difficulties are inherent to the interview technique and we have encountered them in our ethnographic work. Similarly, we have also found that once inside the organisation, opportunities arise that had not been planned for, to formally or informally interview other people, but this can help to obtain fundamental information for our research. So, there is a part of ethnographic work that cannot be planned in advance and that requires an amount of flexibility from the researcher in order to take advantage of any opportunities that come up during the course of the observation.

No major differences have been observed via interviews between those seeking to discover information about news production in the analogue era and multiplatform news production. Conversely, observation has revealed great differences in the two eras that we have been examining.

3.2. Fieldwork: considerations for “getting in”

The purpose of observations are to extract data and information in order to understand production dynamics and check aspects previously detected in the content analysis and in-depth interviews. Using observation, we can define

the organisational and productive models of departments responsible for on-line news production, establish workflows between departments, examine the professional skills of the people responsible for different tasks, etc. Models are determined by endogenous and exogenous factors such as the history of the media itself, the market position, the convictions of managerial teams, the business culture, etc.

In the study of audiovisual production, participant observation provides us with a great deal of information that would be practically impossible to obtain by any other means. However, although observation has its advantages for research, it also has its limitations, which we shall summarise here.

3.2.1. Accessing the field

It is crucial to gain access to the setting in order to investigate media production. Negotiations to access the place of observation have their difficulties and depend on a multitude of circumstances. Media outlets are not overly enthusiastic about ethnographic studies, because they have to authorise the presence of visiting researchers over long periods of time. The process of negotiating access has not changed with respect to the first experiences in the 1980s. Obtaining permission for a reasonably long stay still presents certain difficulties and sometimes this access is restricted to certain professionals, places or artefacts. Depending on the data being sought, the negotiation process has to be carefully planned. Different authors have warned about this process and, specifically, Down and Hughes (2009) present two types of negotiation of access, one through the senior positions in the organisation, “researching up” and the other from below, “researching down”. Each type of access determines a way of obtaining data and certain possibilities for extracting information, which should correspond with the objectives established for the study.

Experience shows that once initial permission to visit certain departments has been obtained, trust is a fundamental value. If the researcher manages to establish this trust with the managers and key informants, they will be able to access new places and new subjects. Likewise, tenacity, insistence and perseverance are essential attitudes for breaking the initially imposed limitations on access to certain places of observation.

In the current era, multiplatform production involves a greater number of agents, departments and artefacts (Erdal, 2009). This multiplication in itself constitutes difficulty for access, as it requires a greater number of interviews and more visits to different departments. However, these observations are essential if we are to understand the full complexity of production flows and the interactions taking place between professionals and between professionals and audiences in different workplaces. In our fieldwork, we have observed how

the creation of online divisions has caused a certain stress within organisations and tensions between their members and the staff that do not belong to these new departments.

The discovery of the flows and interactions between agents is therefore more complex in cross-media production than it was in earlier eras, when the roles and routines of professionals producing news for radio and television were clearly established and delimited. Gaining an understanding of the culture of a cross-media production company is therefore a major challenge for researchers.

3.2.2. *Dealing with field observation*

Having mentioned some of the difficulties in relation to access, we should now turn to the challenges faced by the researcher during observation. First of all, the researcher needs to deal with the distortion that their presence generates in the study group. The management of the organisation must agree to our access in order to perform observations inside the institution and this implies acceptance of our presence by the subjects that we are going to be observing. This relationship between the observer and observed can lead to mistrust, which can interfere with the achievement of the objectives we have set. The initial surprise or mistrust may be overcome after a short while, but it could also persist throughout the observation period and thus ruin the study.

The researcher's experience in dealing with such difficulties and their ability to adapt to the circumstances, and also to interact with the agents, will prove decisive for collecting and capturing all the data needed for the investigation. Integration tends to come about with time, and the researcher should try to find the informants who are most inclined to collaborate, and who they will discover the longer they have been inside the organisation. The complicity of the subjects being observed is essential, as informal exchanges and interactions can be established which can provide a significant amount of information and the kind of knowledge that is hard to obtain using any other system. A lack of permission to visit a certain part of the company can often be overcome through a network of key informants that have been obtained informally.

In our experience, and as many other authors have also noted, informal conversations provide a lot of information, as the informant spontaneously reveals ideas or impressions that can help us to understand organisational aspects and the culture of new media producers that an inexperienced researcher might not be able to uncover. However, although they are an important source of information, the use of informal conversations can cause problems, as researchers are not always authorised to identify their source.

During the observation period, the data obtained from interviews can be compared and contrasted in order to understand aspects that have only been mentioned briefly or that went by unnoticed. Similarly, we can expand the network of informants through direct contact with the agents responsible for the production of audiovisual content for different platforms.

It is during observation that the researcher acquires “in situ” the necessary input to adapt the research to any new possibilities or limitations that might arise. If new forms of analysis emerge from observations or from collaborations with informants that extend beyond the initial expectations, then it is time to redesign the research. This flexibility can be crucial for making the most of the observation period. However, there is a danger of being overawed by the number of new features that are encountered and which can be difficult to interpret. This means narrowing and defining the main objectives and perhaps leaving some aspects that may be interesting but veer too far from the central objectives of the study for later or another research project.

The differences between the first studies conducted in traditional media organisations and those conducted in multimedia companies can be grouped into several categories. First of all, the increase in the types of subject with different professional profiles that have to be observed, and the number of departments involved in multimedia production. The second category is related to the difficulty in observing processes for which there is little evidence, or that are delocalised or not particularly formalised due to constant adaptations or revisions. This category includes the decision making process, which is difficult to observe at the different levels where it occurs: macro (management, news director), meso (editors, heads of section, etc.) or micro (reporters): “Ethnography is the systematic description of human behaviour and organizational culture based on first-hand observation. As new forms of social organization and communities appear, researchers must adapt their methods in order to best capture evidence.” (Howard, 2002: 554).

Through observation, we have found that some production tasks are barely visible at all to the researcher. Some online work in media companies lacks formalisation and some tasks are performed intuitively. The complexity of multiplatform production, with a diversity of agents working in different places with different artefacts, makes it very hard to comprehend only through observation. Additionally, interaction with audiences is becoming more and more commonplace in cross-media production and, due to that complexity, its study can overburden a researcher trying to deal with the phenomenon. These contributions from the audience, which were impossible in earlier times, constitute an object of study in themselves and have attracted much attention among scholars and researchers in recent years (cf. Carpentier, 2007; Carpentier/De Cleen, 2008; Carpentier, 2011; Franquet et al., 2013).

The third category of difficulties with analysis is that related to the examination of artefacts, or objects used by professionals “in the setting you study to understand the participants’ communication rules, meanings, or behaviours. Such artefacts could include the participants’ routine activities such as meeting or interacting with other participants” (Merrigan/Huston, 2009: 242).

4. Conclusion

Without claiming to be an absolutely thorough method of research, it is true that the ethnographic approach allows us to obtain a great deal of original information and “rich first-hand data”. These are the main advantages of using interviews and field observation. However, the lack of access to specific places and/or to specific people in the organization, as well as the time limitation that fieldwork implicitly imposes, causes limitations for the objectives established for the research.

At the same time, the researcher needs to gather a considerable amount of data which must be filed, organized and interpreted properly. This task provides a real challenge if one takes all the variables into account, the actors and artifacts which must be considered in the production of up to date multiplatform news.

However, interpreting qualitative data is a process which has a certain degree of ambiguity and therefore requires great care from the researcher. As a result, it is important to be aware of the advantages and limitations of the ethnographic approach and whenever possible, corroborate our findings with those of other researchers, in order to ensure that our discoveries are legitimate.

Notes

- 1 Some ideas are part of the project entitled “Cross-media environment: Organisational and production transformations in radio and television groups” (CSO2009-09367).
- 2 Universidad Complutense de Madrid (UCM) and Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (UAB).

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Biography

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