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Ethnography
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Many of the qualitative studies submitted for consideration to *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* draw on ethnographic methods that originated in the social science disciplines of anthropology and sociology. They are especially popular in "sociology of news work" studies, which focus on what goes on inside news organizations,

Different researchers suggest different definitions of ethnography, and new disciplines have added new twists. But everyone can probably agree that it involves what Lindlof and Taylor call "a holistic description of cultural membership."[1] This entails studying people within their own cultural environment through intensive fieldwork: The researcher goes to the data, rather than sitting in an office and collecting it. It typically involves in-depth investigation of a small number of cases, sometimes just a single case.[2] Ethnographers emphasize their subjects' frames of reference and try to remain open to their understandings of the world. And ethnography uses multiple techniques, most commonly observation and interviews, but sometimes adding visual recording, document analysis, diaries, and more.[3] Some ethnographies also incorporate quantitative techniques such as questionnaires or, in the field of mass communication, content analyses of products created by the people being studied. Such triangulation increases confidence

in the interpretation of findings; it is particularly useful for exploring the "why" as well as the "what" of a subject.

"Why" and "what" are key questions for journalists, too, of course. This article uses a comparison between journalism and ethnographic research as a framework for highlighting common problems with manuscripts using this method. It then offers a few words on case studies, followed by veteran ethnographers' tips about what they look for in a manuscript. At the end are citations and abstracts for three excellent ethnographies published in *J&MCQ*, examples of successful application of the method to topics of interest to journal readers.

Ethnography and Journalism

Ethnographic research seems to be inherently appealing to journalism scholars, maybe because it fits so reassuringly within their comfort zone. Ethnography involves on-site observations and interviews, making it the closest method to journalistic work done in a previous life. It typically gets researchers back into a newsroom or other media workplace in which they feel at home. And as icing on the cake, it involves relatively few numbers, about which many former professionals secretly (or not) harbor a considerable amount of insecurity, even angst.

But ethnographic research is not journalism, and conflating the two is one of the pitfalls of doing it and writing about it – and as ethnography is both a process and a product,[4] the writing is an integral component, a method of inquiry into author as well as topic.[5] Unfortunately, too many manuscripts whose authors call them ethnographies offer little or no evidence of the methodological rigor that helps separate scholarship from journalism in the eyes of reviewers. Highlighting some of the key differences serves as a rough guideline to what an ethnographic study should contain:

* Most journalism is primarily descriptive; its aim is to accurately represent what was said and done. Ethnographic research is descriptive, too, but it uses what scholars call "thick description"[6] of the contextual significance of actions for the performers.[7] The aim of ethnographic research is to probe for meaning, to understand what is going on in the lives of the people being studied.[8] The level of description should go well beyond merely relaying what the researcher saw or heard.

Reviewers will look for: Evidence that the researcher has probed for meaning rather than merely engaged in a transcription exercise.

* This rightly suggests that ethnographers have a more overt and substantial role in the story they tell than journalists do. Though journalists increasingly acknowledge that "objectivity" is more rhetoric than reality, most Western journalism still posits a clear separation, a formal distance, between the observer – the reporter – and the participants or stakeholders in what is being reported. Ethnographers, on the other hand, rely on "participant observation," which acknowledges not only the presence of the researcher but also the subjectivity of what is seen, recorded, and communicated. Ethnographic research is explicitly interpretive. The ethnographer is "the research instrument *par excellence*,"[9] an active participant in the research process. Ethnography also emphasizes reflexivity, the process of reflecting, which involves an ongoing examination of what one knows and how one knows it; outcomes of that examination form part of the report.[10] Think of it as transparency for scholars – and as especially important for media scholars who once worked in environments similar to the one they are studying and whose own experiences are likely to color perceptions of what their research subjects are experiencing.

Reviewers will look for: Presence of the researcher's voice and acknowledgement of the researcher's interpretive relationship to the subjects, content, and context of the study.

* Aside from breaking news big enough (and close enough) for a reporter to rush to the scene, most journalism relies heavily on quotes from sources – things said either in public, in writing, or directly to the journalist. Although interviews are almost always part of the ethnographic method, they are not the only part; what Delamont calls "proper ethnography" involves fieldwork and participant observation.[11] Quotes can be useful for communicating concepts the researcher wants to emphasize, but they are not a stand-in for those concepts. While it is important for subjects' voices to be heard, that is not license to merely string together chunks of quotes and leave it at that; readers need more evidence, along with more interpretation and contextualization of that evidence, as outlined above.

Reviewers will look for: Evidence of a methodological richness that encompasses, but is not limited to, interview data, as well as appropriate contextualization of that data.

* Most journalism focuses on the immediate, and although investigative pieces can take weeks or even months to develop, the great majority of stories stem from observations and interviews of far shorter duration. Ethnographic research takes time – enough time to gain both acceptance from the research subjects and understanding of them and their situation. A few hours spent hanging out in a newsroom does not an ethnographic study make.

Reviewers will look for: Evidence of reasonably extensive time in the research environment and a nuanced understanding of what the researcher encountered there.

* Journalism is informed by cultural values that operate at a variety of levels, including the occupational and the ideological[12] -- but it is not informed, typically, by theories or concepts in the sense that academic research, including ethnographic research, should be. Theory is a guide to practice; every academic study needs some such guide to help define the problem and how to address it.[13] Moreover, for scholarly readers, the value of a particular piece of research

derives largely from a demonstration of its fit within a broader framework of knowledge or field of investigation. Failure to supply such a framework and adequately discuss its direct relevance to the study at hand is perhaps the most common problem with ethnographic manuscripts (and with manuscripts employing other methods, as well). Although qualitative research need not directly test a theory – again, one of the hallmarks of most qualitative approaches is that data collection is open to the meanings provided by subjects rather than constrained by pre-existing ones[14] -- it should have a clearly articulated value beyond the parameters of the individual study.

Reviewers will look for: Evidence of connections to a framework of knowledge and interpretation that extends beyond the immediate study. Citing some literature at the start and then ignoring it is not good enough. The manuscript should show how what was learned from this study fits within a larger whole, and theory often is what holds that whole together.

* While journalism tends to focus on the unusual – news is, after all, what is new – ethnography explores the routine, daily lives of its subjects. The focus is on ordinary patterns of thought and behavior.[15] Similarly, journalists can and often do write about that single unusual thing in isolation; indeed, one of the criticisms of journalism is its too-frequent failure to relate today's story to what happened before and is likely to happen next. Ethnographers have a dual obligation to supply context, stemming from the holistic nature of the approach and from the overtly subjective stance of the researcher, as already described.

Reviewers will look for: Evidence of meaning extracted from the usual patterns of social life exhibited by those being studied, as well as contextualization of those patterns.

* Last but not least is the matter of ethics. Here there is considerable convergence between journalists and ethnographers; both have ethical responsibilities to various stakeholders, certainly including their sources. (Most journalistic codes of ethics, such as that of the U.S.

Society of Professional Journalists, have more to say about responsibilities to audiences and to the profession as a whole than about responsibilities to sources. But the latter do at least get a nod.[16]) But here, too, there are differences. Ethnographers must obtain informed consent to conduct their work, while journalists typically wade right into any situation they think is of public (ideally) interest. Ethnographers must be candid about their task, explaining what they plan to study and how they plan to study it; journalists have fewer ethical obligations to tell sources up front what they are after. Journalists may use anonymous sources but only rarely give their sources fake names, while the use of pseudonyms is standard practice in ethnographic work. In short, the primary ethical responsibility of the ethnographer is to do no harm[17]; the journalist's primary responsibility is to serve the public.[18]

Reviewers will look for: Evidence that researchers have been sensitive in interacting with sources and in presenting information within the manuscript. A sentence stating that the university's human subjects requirements have been met is generally necessary but not sufficient.

A Few Words about Case Studies

Although not all case studies are ethnographies, most ethnographies are case studies – that is, they apply ethnographic methods to one or more (but usually not many more) cases, with the goal of investigating a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context.[19] Again, a key strength of the method is that it enables the researcher to probe deeply for meaning in a particular, real-world environment. But it is worth bearing in mind some things that a case study, including an ethnographic one, should include:

* An acknowledgement that it is, in fact, a case study. “Ethnography” is a long and impressive-sounding word, but if it involves just one news organization, for instance, it’s also a case study.

* A rationale for selecting this particular case or set of cases. Qualitative fieldwork generally relies on purposive sampling – and readers need to understand the purpose. In general, the case or cases chosen should provide the greatest opportunity to learn about the topic of interest. This is different from the representativeness sought through most quantitative methods; in fact, it may be better to learn a lot from an atypical case than a little from a seemingly typical one.[20] But the point is that the reason for the selection should be convincingly explained.

* Along the same lines, although logistical issues are always a consideration, it’s a red flag to reviewers if convenience seems to be the only or even the primary reason for choosing a particular case. This is a tricky one, particularly for graduate students, who may not have the resources to undertake a study that involves travel costs and so are often tempted to situate their study close to campus. Even so, though, there should be something of interest to learn from that case – and the manuscript should indicate whatever it is.

* The rich and informative insights provided by a case study, particularly one using ethnographic methods, are valuable for their own sake; they do not necessarily tell us about a different case. They can point toward the questions to ask of that different case, but that’s not the same thing. Researchers should be very, very cautious with claims that what was encountered in one environment conveys more than the merest suggestion of what might be encountered in other (or, worse, in all) environments. Newsroom A is not Newsroom B, let alone Newsrooms A-Z. Unless there is a lot of evidence – some of it almost certainly provided through other methods – avoiding generalizations is usually the safest course.

What Other Reviewers Say They Want

Several prominent and experienced ethnographers in disciplines outside mass communication have shared their own criteria for evaluating ethnographic manuscripts. This section includes lists from several of them.

* Laurel Richardson of Ohio State University, an ethnographic pioneer in sociology, offers a widely cited list of criteria for evaluating manuscripts. "Mere novelty," she warns, "does not suffice." Instead, she looks for these attributes, somewhat condensed here:

- *Substantive contribution*: Does this piece contribute to our understanding of social life? Does the piece seem "true" – a credible account of a cultural, social, individual, or communal sense of reality?

- *Aesthetic merit*: Does the use of creative analytical practices open up the text and invite interpretive responses? Is the text artistically shaped, satisfying, complex, and not boring?

- *Reflexivity*: How has the author's subjectivity been both a producer and a product of this text? Is there adequate self-awareness and self-exposure for the reader to assess the point of view?

- *Impact*: Does this piece affect me emotionally or intellectually? Does it generate new questions or move me to write, to act, or to try new research practices?[21]

* Martyn Hammersley, a professor of educational and social research at Britain's Open University, emphasizes validity – the accurate representation of features of the phenomenon that the study is intended to describe, explain, or theorize -- and relevance as key evaluation criteria.

- Assessment of *validity* involves identifying the main claims made by a study, noting the types of claim these represent (for instance, whether the intent is to define, explain, or theorize), then comparing the evidence provided for each claim with what is judged necessary to support its plausibility and credibility.

- Assessment of *relevance* involves considerations of the importance of the topic and the contribution of the findings to expanded knowledge. Hammersley cautions that "mere confirmation of what is already known is of limited value"[22] -- another

good reason for selecting cases with attention to what can be learned from them, as highlighted above.

* Sociologists Donileen R. Loseke and Spencer E. Cahill, both of the University of South Florida, are former co-editors of the *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*. They summarize three categories of manuscript quality that reviewers look for:

- *Investigative and analytic method*, particularly the "goodness of fit" between the epistemological and methodological frameworks that authors claim and what they actually deliver. For traditional ethnographies, critical characteristics include thick description of social life based on what one of their reviewers called "intimate familiarity with the lived experience of real people doing real things."[23] Manuscripts containing only the author's summary of what was seen and heard rather than detailed examples were challenged.

- *Significance and importance* of the work. A manuscript must be about something, and that something must be recognizable to readers, starting with the reviewer. High-quality manuscripts teach readers something new and move the conversation about the chosen topic forward in ways that will interest the target audience.

- *Clarity of the presentation*. Excellent writing is particularly important for qualitative work, which lacks statistical data to build and support an argument. The authors caution that there is no agreement on how persuasiveness is achieved, but they point to the value of creative stylistic devices such as use of vivid scenes and metaphors to enliven arguments and hold attention. They also warn that reviewers can easily spot class papers and dissertation chapters, which seldom make good journal articles without significant transformation.[24]

Ethnographic Research in Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly

Finally, here are a few strong examples of ethnographies published in *J&MCQ* over roughly the past decade, which researchers who are thinking about submitting their own ethnographic studies may want to consult. The abstracts indicate that the authors have gone well beyond description to probe for both situated meaning and broader significance in their work. Note that all three also are identified as case studies.

* Tracy Everbach, "The Culture of a Women-Led Newspaper: An Ethnographic Study of the *Sarasota Herald-Tribune*" (2006, Vol. 83, No. 3: 477-493).

Abstract: This case study of a U.S. newspaper led by an all-female management team found that the culture of the newsroom reflected the so-called "feminine" traits of its leaders. Through qualitative, ethnographic methods of interview and observation, the researcher documented ways that the female managers brought feminine standpoints to the workplace. Family-friendly policies, openness, teamwork, and communication, identified by management and communication scholars as feminine characteristics, were hallmarks of the newspaper's culture.

* B. William Silcock, "Global News, National Stories: Producers as Mythmakers at Germany's Deutsche Welle Television" (2002, Vol. 79, No. 2: 339-352).

Abstract: This article explores the mythic nature of television news in a global-newsroom context. News routine analysis of newscast producers and ethnographic data from a case study of the English-language newsroom at Germany's Deutsche Welle point to the existence of sociocultural filters influencing news decisions and, in turn, mythmaking. These filters reveal a uniquely German myth (the Past) not shared and even resisted by English-language (Anglo) producers framing stories and constructing newscasts from a German news organization for a global audience.

* Elizabeth Blanks Hindman, "`Spectacles of the Poor': Conventions of Alternative News" (1998, Vol. 75, No. 1: 177-193).

Abstract: This is an ethnographic case study of an inner-city neighborhood newspaper caught between two worlds: that of mainstream journalism, with its traditional routines and expectations, and that of alternative journalism, which emphasizes advocacy for lower-income people and presenting the world from the neighborhood's, not the outside world's, perspective. The study focuses on how the newspaper deals with the conflict between those worlds and their interpretations of the conventions of objectivity, newsgathering, and story construction.

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NOTES

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[5] Laurel Richardson, "Writing: A Method of Inquiry," in *Collecting and Interpreting Qualitative Materials*, 2nd edn., eds. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2003), 499-541.

[6] Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

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[11] Sara Delamont, "Ethnography and Participant Observation," in *Qualitative Research Practice*, eds. Clive Seale, Giampetro Gobo, Jaber F. Gubrium, and David Silverman (London: Sage, 2004), 217-229; 218.

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