

Ethnography in Media and Cultural Research: A Comprehensive Evolution from Cultural Study to Media Practices

الإثنوغرافيا في بحوث الإعلام والثقافة:
تطور شامل من الدراسة الثقافية إلى الممارسات الإعلامية

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Abstract:

This article examines the historical development and contemporary relevance of ethnography within media and cultural studies. It traces ethnography's transformation from early accounts by figures like Herodotus to its establishment as a core anthropological method during colonial times. Originally used to study so-called "primitive" societies, ethnography has since evolved into a dynamic tool for analyzing media consumption and cultural identity in today's globalized world.

The paper emphasizes how media ethnography enables a deep, context-rich understanding of how people engage with media across different social and spatial environments. It critiques conventional media research for often ignoring the lived, localized, and mobile nature of audience experiences- particularly in the digital era where media use is increasingly fragmented and personalized.

By incorporating theoretical frameworks such as Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model and drawing on insights from the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), the article highlights the audience as an active participant in meaning-making. It ultimately advocates for ethnographic approaches that are interdisciplinary, multi-sited, and inclusive, arguing that such methods are essential for capturing the complex and shifting relationships between media, identity, space, and culture in the digital age.

Key words: Ethnography; Media Ethnography; Audience Reception; Cultural Identity; media practices.

الملخص:

يتناول هذا المقال التطور التاريخي والراهنية المعاصرة للمنهج الإثنوغرافي ضمن دراسات الإعلام والثقافة. حيث يستعرض تحوّل الإثنوغرافيا من كتابات الرحّالة الأوائل مثل "هيرودوت" إلى ترسيخها كمنهج أساسي في الأنثروبولوجيا خلال الحقبة الاستعمارية. فبعد أن ارتبطت تقليدياً بدراسة المجتمعات "البدائية"، تطورت الإثنوغرافيا لتصبح أداة منهجية حيوية لتحليل استهلاك الإعلام وبناء الهوية الثقافية في عالمنا المعولم المعاصر. يبرز المقال كيف أن الإثنوغرافيا الإعلامية توفّر فهماً عميقاً ومُركّزاً على السياق لكيفية تفاعل الأفراد والمجتمعات مع الوسائط الإعلامية عبر بيانات اجتماعية ومكانية متباينة. كما ينتقد الاتجاهات التقليدية في بحوث الإعلام التي غالباً ما تهمل طبيعة التجارب اليومية المتغيرة للجمهور، خصوصاً في العصر الرقمي حيث أصبح استهلاك الإعلام أكثر تشظيلاً وتخصيصاً.

من خلال توظيف نماذج نظرية مثل نموذج "الترميز/الفك الترميزي" لستيوارت هول، والاستفادة من أعمال مركز الدراسات الثقافية المعاصرة، يؤكد المقال على دور الجمهور كفاعل نشط في صناعة المعنى. ويختتم بدعوة لاعتماد مناهج إثنوغرافية متعددة المواقع وتعددية التخصصات، بوصفها أدوات ضرورية لفهم العلاقات المعقدة والمتغيرة بين الإعلام والهوية والثقافة في العصر الرقمي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الإثنوغرافيا؛ الإثنوغرافيا الإعلامية؛ استقبال الجمهور؛ الهوية الثقافية؛ ممارسات الإعلام.

Introduction:

Ethnography, as a research methodology, has significantly influenced the fields of anthropology, cultural studies, and media studies. Rooted in the study of cultures, traditions, and social norms, ethnography evolved from early descriptive works of travelers and historians to a formalized approach in understanding communities and societies. This article explores the foundations and evolution of ethnography, tracing its historical roots and development from classical antiquity through colonial encounters to modern anthropological study. It also examines the role of ethnography in media and cultural research, focusing on how it provides critical insights into media consumption, audience behavior, and the dynamics of cultural identity in a rapidly globalizing world.

The research draws attention to the impact of ethnographic methods in understanding the relationships between media, culture, and audiences, especially in the context of new media technologies and the digital age. By focusing on media ethnography, the study underscores how different cultural and social settings shape media consumption and interpretation, while also reflecting on the significant methodological shifts within the field. These include a transition from class-based analyses to a more nuanced approach that incorporates gender, identity, and the social context of media use.

In its pursuit of examining these shifts, this article poses the central research question: How have ethnographic methodologies evolved in media studies, and to what extent do they reveal the complexities of audience

interaction with media in a globalized and digital context? This question will guide the exploration of ethnography's contribution to media research and the understanding of cultural identities in contemporary media environments.

1- The Foundations and Evolution of Ethnography: From Cultural Studies to Anthropological Exploration:

Ethnography, as a research methodology, has evolved over centuries, beginning with the study of cultures and traditions, and progressing through significant historical developments that shaped its current form in anthropology and cultural studies.

1-1 Ethnography Defined: A Study of Culture, Values, and Traditions

Ethnography is a field and analytical study of the customs, values, traditions, and norms of specific communities. This methodology was historically associated with the study of primitive peoples. (Hussein Fahim, 1986, p 14).

According to Hussein Fahim, "Ethnography is the descriptive study of the lifestyle, traditions, customs, values, tools, arts, and folklore of a specific group or community during a defined period of time" (Jack Lombard, 1997, p 12).

The English anthropologist Radcliffe-Brown defines ethnography as an examination and description of cultural phenomena, especially in underdeveloped societies. Ethnography is essentially an applied study aimed at understanding how societies are organized. In other words, "it refers to the descriptive study of the lifestyle, traditions, customs, values, tools, arts, and folklore of a particular group or community over a defined period" (Adnan Ahmad Muslim, 2001, p55)

In general, ethnography is an applied, systematic, and field-based research approach aimed at studying a society's values, customs, norms, traditions, and cultural activities. Thus, ethnographic description is the first stage in research work. While ethnology and anthropology focus on interpreting customs, norms, and institutions-i.e, the stage of synthesis or composition, often achieved through the comparative method. This level of research inquiry reveals diverse techniques or approaches depending on the researchers. Some may interpret religious rituals, for instance, through their societal functions of integration and unity, while others compare settled farmers with nomadic herders to draw out contrasting cultural characteristics and psychological profiles. Each type of

interpretation belongs to a specific intellectual school. ((Jack Lombard,1997, p p 13, 14).

1-2 The Evolution of Ethnography: Tracing its Historical Roots

The historical roots of ethnography can be traced back to classical antiquity in the writings of Herodotus and Tacitus about the Egyptians, Scythians, and Germanic tribes. They were travelers like their successors in the Middle Ages, such as Marco Polo and the contemporary Muslim Ibn Battuta, who spent short periods in various locations, gathering knowledge through personal observations and local conversations. They developed a distinctive genre of travel writing that reflected a sense of awe at the social and cultural differences among humanity. (Robert Launay, 2010, p 5).

There are also references that trace the roots of ethnography, or the writing of culture, back to ancient Greece, with Herodotus, known as the "father of history." He traveled from one culture to another, documenting the traditions and political and cultural practices of the peoples of the ancient world during the 5th century BCE. Herodotus wrote a nine-part volume titled "The History," a Greek term meaning inquiry, focusing on two main themes: expressing culture and writing its political history. Specifically, Herodotus explored the Middle East as the center of the world, believing there was a clash between two distinct civilizations: Eastern and Western, Persian and Greek. (Robin Patric Clair, 2003, p p 3, 4).

The rise of science and humanity during the Renaissance encouraged a more systematic study of non-Western cultures, a methodology that preceded the work of the 14th-century historian Ibn Khaldun. He compared what different peoples and cultures proposed to scientific thinking and global classifications, as well as the appropriate research methods. The data collection guide written by the French philosopher Joseph Marie Degérando in 1800 served as a foundational text for ethnography. This guide became the basis for the French Ethnological Society's 1840 guide, as well as for inquiries and observations in anthropology in 1841, which has had multiple editions. (Antonius Robben, Jeffrey Sluka, 2015, p 178).

1-3 The Birth of Ethnography: From Colonial Encounters to Anthropological Study

Ethnography emerged in early anthropology in the 19th century, with its roots traceable to the colonization of the "New World," when anthropologists

===== Ethnography in Media and Cultural Research: A Comprehensive Evolution...

became interested in exploring races and cultures outside of Europe. The primary focus was the study of "primitive" and non-industrial peoples and cultures using description, written records, and photography. (Ryan GS, 2017, p 3).

By the late 19th century, ethnography underwent a significant change when the quality of ethnographic data, the comparative method, and the theory of cultural evolution were questioned. Alfred Haddon's journey to the Torres Strait Islands marked this shift. The early empirical research was conducted by a multidisciplinary team of scientists who surveyed the archipelago as a single cultural area, rejected speculative comparisons between cultures, and collected local classifications in the native language, despite hardly observing them in people's daily practices. Haddon introduced the term "fieldwork" into anthropology and integrated the anthropologist's role with that of the field researcher in ethnography. (Antonius Robben, Jeffrey Sluka, 2015, p 178).

2-The Role and Impact of Ethnography in Media and Cultural Research :

Ethnography plays a pivotal role in understanding the complex relationships between media, culture, and audiences, offering valuable insights into how media shapes societal dynamics and how audiences engage with and interpret media content.

2-1 Exploring Media Ethnography: Understanding Cultural Dynamics in Media Contexts

"Media ethnography" deals with the study of cultural and behavioral interactions of individuals and communities within various media contexts. This approach focuses on how both traditional and digital media influence the shaping of social and cultural identities. It also highlights the importance of direct observation and field research to understand media dynamics and their impact on the daily lives of communities.

Media ethnography should not consider space as a fact but as a challenge: as the subject/object of critical inquiry. This requires posing new questions and thus opening the "space" to new horizons. For example, how is social change and social difference represented in space? How does space change and differ (genetically and geographically) in people's minds and their daily lives? How have media - and their social use - altered and differentiated space? To what extent does space – as conceptualized, perceived, and/or lived – create different and evolving media uses? Can these changes and differences help define different cultural identities within the so-called "information society"? How

might they contribute to a deeper understanding of the "globalization era"? (Clua, A. Anna, 2004, p 62).

Ethnographic researchers in media have only recently started to define fieldwork in terms of space. However, there has not been enough effort to consider audiences beyond their natural settings (e.g., the home). Viewing space differently (as suggested by geographer Edward Soja) involves asking new questions, thus broadening the scope of media ethnography. This also means opening up the research for more interdisciplinary understanding and practice. When conducting fieldwork, media ethnographers must also clarify "space in motion": that is, as a transformative space yet defined in terms of power, economy, history, etc. Thus, we must be able to identify and discuss the differences (and also disparities) created by space in the reception of media. The question is not whether space is global or local, public or private, rural or urban, "inside" or "outside," "here" or "there," etc., but rather, what is the ongoing friction that space reveals and shapes, and how does this friction act as a creative force? (Edgar Gómez Cruz, Elisenda Ardevol, 2013, p 29).

2-2 Reconsidering Audience Research: Ethnographic Approaches in Media Studies

Above all, there is the issue of not conceptualizing space from a holistic and/or restrictive perspective. Theoretical statements can only become practical in practice by continually questioning our position as researchers within academia and as political actors in society. Thinking about space in this way allows us to reflect on this paradox and the inadequacy of only engaging in theoretical discourse or solely conducting empirical research.

In fact, nothing prevents us from pushing further. Judy Burland and James Hi (from completely different theoretical stances) call for an "unassumed" definition of space in audience research. Hi (1996) emphasizes that "audiences are a spatial project." He points out that listening, reading, and watching occur in and around certain locations, within a socially organized, geographically structured world. But he also acknowledges that these activities simultaneously create "paths" – from one location to another – through everyday life, and these paths diverge from research methods that favor certain sites of daily life. (Clua, A. Anna, 2004, p 63).

Some audience researchers have focused on encounters between the global and the local (often better defined as "friction"). In any case, what these texts

attempt to convey is thinking about space as a problematic issue. This is precisely the reason why space is important. Soja's "postmodern geographies" can provide suggestions for media ethnographers to critically redefine the "field" in empirical work that has traditionally been situated. Fieldwork should not be described as something confined to a specific, fixed, and/or assumed space.

On one hand, fieldwork should be placed within a scenario of struggle to represent differences (as space has political significance that media ethnographers may overlook). On the other hand, media ethnographers need to position their steps in a space that is part of and contains the life paths of people (and our own lives), our history and transient biographies, our mixed identities, shifting emotions, and fleeting imaginations.

Over the past decade, cultural audience studies and critical geography have attempted to approach each other within a theoretical framework. So far, they have focused on reflecting on shared methodological issues using exactly the same terminology, sharing the same critical and non-positive stances in terms of epistemology, but at least within the academic context, media ethnography has not been developed, for example, by transcending types of boundaries (which separate departments or faculties, which separate theory from fieldwork) that are defined on the academic map. However, as Clifford (1992) said, placing ethnographic work in the field also has its limits, and this can be especially true when there are research disparities between disciplines and international differences, where cultural boundaries may also exist. To approach the issue differently, in this chapter, I tried to point to the idea that researchers, as well as any other members of the studied community, can be considered "travelers" of a sort, crossing shifting borders. This creates another kind of vision of "shared" real and imagined places. (Clua, A. Anna, 2004, p 63)

3- The Significance and Impact of Ethnography in Media and Cultural Research

3-1 The Value of Ethnography in Media and Cultural Research

The ethnographic approach in audience research has been present among researchers in the field of media and cultural studies since the 1980s. This methodological approach, inspired by anthropology, which began in Europe and North America, is common among media anthropologists and reception researchers in non-Western countries. For example, these researchers adopt this approach to study television consumption and identity politics, media and

nation-building, and the reception of soap operas and modernity. (Lily El Ferawati Rofil, 2019, p 2).

Since the 1980s, the ethnographic method has gained prominence in audience research and has intensified its use since the beginning of this century. It involves studying the communicative behavior of the audience and the possible interactions with the media messages they receive from various available media in the new communicative space, with the internet being its most important medium. This medium has become a competitor to television as a new home technology tool, and as a result, the concern of parents and educators has shifted to the potential effects of this powerful and rapidly spreading medium on various aspects of people's lives.

This new communicative space, which is essentially an extension of the space resulting from the intensive use of home technologies, generalizes the ethnographic methodological choices for the new trend in audience research. It falls under what is now known as the ethnographic methodology (ethno-methodologie) in reception studies. The ethnographic approach has been used in audience studies in light of the globalization of rapidly expanding media messages, thanks to live television broadcasting via satellites, digital systems, encrypted channels, and internet television, which is expected to replace encrypted channels within the next decade.

As Ramswamy sees it, there are two types of modern comprehensive audience studies that began in the early 2000s. The first focuses on the role of ethnic groups, a type that has revived cultural and media imperialism theses and tries to reshape them within the framework of anti-globalization movements. The second redirects research toward the role of media in shaping their perceptions of ethnic identities in their new environments. (Samira Belghithia, 2018, p 750).

According to (Alaswatari, 1999), audience ethnography is a prominent trend in the second and third generations of media reception research, which focuses on studying the relationships between media, culture, and communities. While the previous generation focused on critical inquiries about identity politics, media usage in different contexts, and the role of media in daily life, the following generation proposes "bringing media back to media studies," where both content and audience interpretation are analyzed critically. Ethnography provides a mechanism that allows media researchers to "overcome the

artificiality in mass communication research based on data that happens naturally" (Lily El Ferawati Rofil, 2019, p 3).

3-2 The Significance of Ethnography in Media Studies:

The importance of ethnography as a methodology in media and culture research lies in its core principle, which recognizes the audience as active consumers of media texts. David Morley (1992) argues that media audience research needs to shift from the "pessimistic thesis of the mass society" to a transition between "optimistic" and "pessimistic" paradigms. Furthermore, Morley (1992) suggests that communication researchers take into account "the dimensions of power and influence through which the powerful (leaders and communicators) are connected with the powerless (ordinary people and the audience)". In this way, both the content of messages that affect the audience and the social meanings produced by the audience in negotiating with the message can be analyzed in a symmetrical and simultaneous manner.

Similarly, contemporary audience ethnography offers its best approach, including both media-based and audience-based research, by analyzing and discussing media programs by both the audience and researchers, with direct experience in the field. (Lily El Ferawati Rofil, 2019, p 3).

4- Exploring the Field of Media Ethnography:

The encoding/decoding model posits that viewers adopt one of three positions (the dominant position, the negotiated position, or the oppositional position), which can be understood as the relative distance of the viewer from the preferred meaning encoded in the text. Their distance from the preferred meaning is assumed to be determined by their social class position.

The study was based on interviews with 29 groups (ranging from 5 to 10 people) including school students, students (partially or fully in higher education and vocational training), full-time and part-time union officials, and managers in banking institutions. The "Nationwide" program was shown to these groups and discussed (and recorded on tape) for about 30 minutes.

The essence of Stuart Hall's article on encoding/decoding is simple. It assumes that television has meaning at different moments: as part of production (or encoding) and as part of the reception moment (or decoding). Encoding and decoding are related but never identical. Since each is based on its own frame of knowledge and shaped by production relations and technical infrastructure, they will necessarily be different and produce meaningful and relevant discourse, but

in different contexts of production or viewing. Hall then distinguishes three hypothetical positions for viewers:

- First, the dominant-hegemonic position, where the viewer decodes the message according to the encoded signifier, thus following the "preferred reading" of the text;
- Second, the negotiated position, which contains a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements, where the viewer does not simply accept the "preferred reading" of the text;
- Third, the oppositional position, where the viewer strongly resists or outright rejects the "preferred reading." (Joke Hermes, 2010, p06).

Morley's study of "Nationwide" showed that making the television text meaningful is actually more complex than the encoding/decoding model and its three positions suggest. For example, Morley found that groups sharing the same class position (Hall's production relations) offered different interpretations. However, the encoding/decoding model still provides the theoretical foundation for the concept of "reception analysis" (a term used to refer to media ethnography), which sees viewers as active producers of meaning. Their "readings" are a product of their social experiences and class position, as well as the extent of cultural knowledge they have access to. The "preferred" encoded meaning of the text constrains possible readings, but it does not control them entirely.

The "boom" in media ethnography occurred later in the early 1980s, partly inspired by the work of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), which did not originally focus on media. Reception studies began across Europe, which inspired British researchers working at the center to continue and initiate new works related to media audiences. Ian Ang's Dutch study of "Dallas" (1985) is an example of a study inspired by the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies and one of the key texts from that period. Another key text is "Family Television" by David Morley (1986). Another example of European work on media audiences is Kirsten Drotner's research on Danish youth and video (Drotner, 1989).

The criteria for experimental qualitative audience studies were established in this period: Unlike previous research from the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies and critical mass communication research in general, gender became just as, if not more, important than class position; there was a strong

focus on popular culture rather than, for example, avant-garde film (high culture), or working-class culture and folklore; the social context of media usage was seen as highly important, while the media text itself received less attention than in text-focused analysis. (Joke Hermes, 2010, p 6).

The researcher effectively highlights the significant shift in media ethnography during the 1980s, which marked a departure from traditional mass communication studies. The influence of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) is clearly evident, especially in its focus on reception studies and how media audiences interact with content. The mention of studies like Ian Ang's work on "Dallas" (1985) and David Morley's "Family Television" (1986) illustrates how audience research evolved, shifting the focus from a purely class-based analysis to a more nuanced understanding that includes gender, popular culture, and the social context of media consumption.

The researcher notes the increasing importance of these factors, particularly gender, over class in later studies, and emphasizes how the socio-cultural context of media usage became a central area of interest. This change represents a broader recognition that media consumption is a dynamic and multi-layered process, where personal and social identities, rather than simply class or high culture, are central to how media texts are understood. The move away from focusing exclusively on the text itself is particularly insightful, as it signals a more holistic approach to understanding media audiences.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, this article has provided a thorough analysis of the evolution of ethnography and its relevance to media and cultural research. From its origins in classical and colonial contexts to its current application in examining media practices, ethnography has proven to be a powerful tool for understanding how audiences interact with media and construct cultural meaning. The article emphasized the importance of considering not only the content of media texts but also the social and spatial contexts in which they are consumed.

By introducing the concept of "space in motion" and engaging with theories like Hall's encoding/decoding model, the study highlighted the active role of audiences in meaning-making and called for more dynamic approaches to media ethnography. Ultimately, ethnography is shown to be essential in exploring the intersection of media, identity, power, and globalization.

Based on this article, the following recommendations can be proposed:

- Broaden the methodological scope of ethnographic research.
- Adopt multi-sited ethnographic approaches.
- Promote interdisciplinary integration in media studies.
- Ensure greater inclusion of diverse and marginalized audiences.
- Examine the cultural impact of digital and social media platforms.

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