Article

Popularizing ethnography: reflections on writing for popular audiences in magazines and blogs

Qualitative Research
13(4) 442–451

DOI: 10.1177/1468794113481795
qrj.sagepub.com

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Abstract

Ethnography has witnessed a staggering proliferation of genres over the last three decades. Modes of communication have similarly expanded. In spite of this, most ethnographers still rely on the prototypical media of their trade: the book and the journal article. The objective of this article is to examine the process of communicating ethnography through more widely accessible media such as popular print magazines, web-based magazines, and blogs. Drawing examples from my own public ethnography, I reflect on practical considerations that ethnographers might want to entertain whenever they attempt to popularize their work through these channels. I also provide reflections on the risks and limitations typical of these media.

Keywords

blogs, ethnography, ethnographic representation, knowledge mobilization, magazines, popular media, public ethnography

Ethnography has witnessed a staggering proliferation of genres over the last three decades. What not so long ago was simply known as participant observation is now available in myriad varieties: reflexive, analytical, collaborative, sensory, sensuous, embodied, institutional, virtual, arts-based, participatory, autoethnographic, narrative, performative, and so on (e.g. for a directory see Atkinson et al. 2007; Hobbs and Wright 2006). Modes of communication have similarly boomed; now ethnographers can operate not only through the typical mode of writing but also through aural, visual, hypertext, and various multimodal documentation strategies (e.g. for a directory see Knowles and Cole 2007; Vannini 2012a). In spite of the growth in genres and modes of communication, most ethnographers—due to hiring, promotion, and funding pressures, but also arguably owing to some less tangible forces like habit and limited skill sets—still rely on the prototypical media of their trade:

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the book and the journal article. Because these two media have very limited audiences, public ethnographers logically want greater exposure.

In keeping with the purpose of this special issue on making ethnography public, my objective in this short article is to examine the process of communicating ethnography through widely accessible media such as popular print magazines, web-based magazines, and blogs. To be sure, these media are not the only available channels to popularize ethnography. However, the limited space available here forces me to concentrate upon channels demanding similar dissemination strategies and compositional techniques. In this article, therefore, I reflect on practical considerations that ethnographers might want to entertain whenever they attempt to popularize their work through these channels. Such considerations may seem to be common sense to those who have already enjoyed some success in this publishing realm. However, I want to follow the guest editors' incitement and generate serviceable reflections on the actual process of doing public ethnography.

In the pages to come, I will refer to my recent and ongoing attempts to popularize my own ethnographic work in widely distributed publications. My experiences derive from the popularization of a multisite fieldwork study documenting the lifestyles of Canadians who live off the grid. This research has been animated from the onset by a personal and institutional interest in the mobilization of ethnographic knowledge. In fact, over the last 2 years, I have been fortunate enough to receive federal funding to produce research that can be readily and widely disseminated to public audiences through both conventional and new media. For this reason, I have dedicated significant amounts of time and other resources to the development of public ethnography and learned numerous lessons along the way. My reflections in this article pertain exclusively to my own experiments in ethnographic knowledge mobilization but are intended to stimulate others to tackle similar challenges and hopefully avoid my mistakes.

Composing ethnography for magazines

Many ethnographers enjoy writing and know how to write well. Magazines generally publish good writing, dedicate a great deal of attention to human interest content, and can reach wide audiences. Popular magazines can therefore constitute an appealing medium for ethnographic work. However, public ethnographers have yet to learn how to take advantage of this medium's potential (for an exception, see Zompetti 2012).

Writing for a magazine generally begins with a pitch from a writer to an editor. Unlike the academic journal article submission process, submitting a pitch to a magazine requires some basic 'marketing' know-how because the query has to be enticing enough to capture the attention of an editor with multiple competing choices on her desk. Several websites explain in detail how to do this, so I will not discuss the art of pitching in too much depth, but in essence, I will say that in my experience a magazine pitch

- should be concise but sufficiently descriptive (a 150–200 word email is typically what I submit),
- ought to be relevant to the audience of the magazine,
- should be ideally timely in that it addresses a topic of contemporary interest, and
- should establish the credentials of the writer.

I find the last point to be especially important. Magazine editors receive frequent pitches by freelancers from all kinds of backgrounds. Academics and advanced students have professional status and expertise that set them apart from the rest of freelance writers and should not be afraid to begin their pitch by explicitly articulating those credentials. If writing samples are available, I make sure to send them as part of my pitch, but at the same time, I do not want to convey the impression that my research has been published too much before (editors like some degree of exclusivity). Once a pitch is sent, the writer needs to wait for an editorial response—which can be nearly immediate or may take up to 3–4 weeks—but, unlike journal submission, multiple magazine solicitations can be made simultaneously.

Once a query is accepted, the writer is given a deadline and a maximum word count, and from there onward, the process unfolds like any other editorial process. Accompanying photography can help a pitch, but not necessarily, if it is not of sufficiently high quality or if publishing space is unavailable for pictures. Finally, editors may issue formal contracts, make more or less detailed promises for payment, or guarantee no payment. Some academic writers might see getting paid for one's writing as a welcome change from actually having to pay fees to be published, whereas others might view profit-making as inappropriate (more on this later).

Magazines are periodical publications containing a variety of thematic content. While the word 'magazine' has traditionally referred to print publications, magazines increasingly duplicate content on the web—or publish exclusively online—so the distinction between printed and web-based publication will not be of immediate consequence here. Magazines' thematic content is enormously diverse, of course, a fact which creates an interesting opportunity for ethnographers. Ethnographies are as diverse in content and subject matter as life itself and are therefore amenable to being shared through a vast variety of magazines. Ethnographers would do well to consult the magazine shelves of a library, bookstore, or news kiosk or do Internet searches to get some inspiration and ideas for new publishing outlets.

In addition to stratification by subject matter, ethnographers interested in magazine publication might also be able to make their research relevant to publications that cover a geographical area where a particular fieldwork project has unfolded. For example, my research on off-grid living takes place across all of Canada, in all, 10 provinces and 3 territories. As a result, I have been able to pitch stories to magazines not only in light of the subject matter of my work but also because my fieldwork was conducted in the communities where a magazine is read. It is important to start from smaller publications and only gradually work up enough confidence, skills, and credibility to submit to more prestigious and national and international titles.

Most magazines have a distinct audience characterized by people with similar demographic and social characteristics. This is what makes them appealing to advertisers, obviously. This is also something that can make them useful to ethnographers keen on sharing a message among a particular public. Being able to share insider knowledge or common values with an audience might enable an ethnographer's message to be better understood, well-received, and perhaps even more potent. Being able to speak a similar 'language' with an audience might also come in handy if an ethnographer has to counter a particularly tight space allocation, which might otherwise make it difficult to explain technical terms or provide much context.

A key difficulty of writing for magazines is the limited space. A typical magazine article ranges from 700 to 1500 words, and only rarely do writers receive more than 2000 words. This may seem incapacitating to an academic accustomed to 8000 word limits and up. In my experience, limited space is no reason to give up. An 8000-word journal article is typically filled with many sections (e.g. introduction, literature review, conclusion, references) that can make the actual ethnographic content quite limited (e.g. 2000 words or less). Because magazine editors typically treat an ethnographic article as a 'human interest' type of story, their interest primarily focuses on the 'data' and a brief argument framing the story. As a result, my magazine pieces generally follow an easily replicable format squarely centered on the story and argument my 'data' allow me to tell without having resort to complex academic concepts requiring long explanations.

Take, for example, the article 'Bamfield's unlikely off-gridders' (Vannini, 2012b). In the magazine lingo, this piece is called a 'profile'. Profiles allow readers to become (relatively) intimately acquainted with one individual (or a couple, in this case) and the immediate circumstances at hand. While a 1300-word article cannot provide an in-depth portrait of a human being, the content is actually longer than that generally reserved to an informant in a typical journal article, where persons are reduced to fictitious names and anonymous places, one-letter identifiers for race and gender, age, and a four-line quote. When compared this way, a magazine piece might actually feel more intimate than a journal article!

Now, let us examine format in some detail. Generally, a magazine article begins with a *hook*, like 'Jan and Nelson aren't the typical off-grid couple'. This hook teases the reader into wanting to know more, in this case into wanting to know what makes Jan and Nelson atypical. The actual *resolution* to the hanging interrogative does not come into focus until about two-thirds of the way into the article, when the reader's attention is finally pointed to Jan and Nelson's 'birthdays', and their actual age is not revealed until the very end of the writing. Now, this format is meant to 'seduce' the readers into staying with the piece; their curiosity is what, ideally, keeps them going. This is quite different from a typical journal article characterized by an introduction that gives away the entire content by way of a detailed preview and summary.

Another example of a hook is what I call a *puzzle piece*. A puzzle piece is essentially a question—which either I or an informant asks—with no immediately available or even relevant answer. Take, for instance, the puzzle piece I used in 'Cutting the cord', an article published in *Canadian Geographic* (Vannini, 2012c): 'What happens when you apply heat and cold to a Peltier Junction?' A puzzle piece of this kind is not meant to capture the reader's interest in the actual answer—after all, the reader of this magazine may or may not be interested in physics—but is rather meant to perform an old trick of the ethnographic trade: making the ordinary unfamiliar. By catching the reader by surprise, hopefully enough interest is sparked to keep him going. Eventually, other pieces of the puzzle are added. It is a bit like concealing a photo almost in its entirety, evoking curiosity in the rest of the hidden image, and then eventually revealing more bits one at a time.

Between a hook and a resolution stands what ethnographers would call thick description. In this sense, magazine editors are no different from academic gatekeepers: they expect more showing than telling, sufficiently detailed context, and a detailed-enough portrait of people and relevant actions. Now, as ethnographers, we know very well that 1000 words are not enough to provide a thick description; however, by foregrounding

important details and backgrounding less relevant others, by evoking rather than systematically describing, and by hinting rather than exhaustively categorizing, much can be done in a few words. Indeed, it helps to think of a magazine profile as a *fragment*: a small piece of a broader puzzle but still a piece warranting attention in itself. A fragment might hopefully be good enough to incite the reader to want to learn more—from a book, for example, which can be cited as part of an author's bio.

There are other important differences between ethnographic magazine writing and the more traditional fare. In the above-mentioned pieces, for example, I adopted a few rhetorical devices that not every academic editor would go for. For example, the two articles begin with a focus on me as a writer. I generally do this because much of ethnographic writing resembles the popular trope of travel writing. By writing as if my work was a kind of travel writing (and in a way all ethnography is), I position my story on my process of *discovery*. Discovery is the broad format for which my ethnographic work—and arguably much of ethnographic research, in general—is commonly accepted. By presenting fieldwork as a process of gradual discovery, I also avoid coming across as an annoying know-it-all who has all the answers before a trip can even begin.

Next, in the opening, close attention is paid to the where, when, what, how, and why of a story: the key elements of the introductions typical of journalistic writing. Within the opening paragraphs, therefore, I stage a scene that tells the reader where I am, when I find myself there, how I got there, and what I am doing. I pay no attention to the typical demands of academic introductions that would expect me to state my thesis, make explicit the worth of my work, cite my influences, and offer a preview of my writing. If I ever need to cite someone, I try to do so subtly.

Following the points above, in contrast to academic writing, I offer no signposts in any of my magazine writing. 'Signposting' is what we do (constantly) in academic writing when we tell our readers what we are about to argue, how we are about to organize our work, what section comes next, or what we just discussed or found. In other words, when writing for a magazine, I just try to bring readers along on a voyage without regularly stepping to the side to inform them on where we are going.

In academic ethnographic writing, my personal idiosyncrasies are generally silenced; in ethnographic magazine writing, I feel I am expected to provide color to my character and make the situation in which I find myself interesting. This is what almost any creative nonfiction writer does as well in order to make a character relatable or at least memorable. Thus, in 'Cutting the cord', I am a clumsy handyman, and in 'Bamfield's unlikely off-gridders', I am a wonderer and a wanderer. The focus is never on me as a protagonist, however, but merely as a travel guide and fellow discoverer.

Short informant quotes are necessary in magazine ethnographic writing. They are intended to evoke a sense of dialogue and are meant to lend character to a human subject. They are, therefore, aimed at creating a scene and not used as verbal data to closely analyze. As a result, I choose bits of dialogues that contribute to the narrative unfolding of a piece, and I paraphrase what I cannot otherwise display. As opposed to academic writing, I too take part in conversations by asking questions and taking turns at speaking. Conversation is an important part of storytelling, so I am not afraid to hide questions or comments that my reader would typically say in the same circumstances if she were there. I do not hide my emotions.

Short and vibrant sentences and paragraphs replace the verbosity of academic writing. Indeed, at times, a single sentence can constitute a paragraph if it represents an important narrative element and I want to bring attention to it. I also write with a thesaurus at hand to keep my word choice fresh, and I make sure that the important conceptual keywords are prominent but easy to understand. Look, for example, at the emphasis 'self-sufficiency' receives in 'Cutting the cord'.

I do not abstain from making some generalizations and engaging in argumentation. I do so in order to contribute to the sense of discovery typical of a piece, and not in order to contribute to theoretical understanding or generate a new concept. Magazine editors, unlike journal editors, are interested first and foremost in the story, in the 'empirical evidence', if you will. A story has to have a message and that message can and should be told in few, simple words. Conveying a message this way actually even helps me as an academic writer too: whenever I become able to tell what my research is about in few and simple words that everybody can understand, I end up understanding it better myself!

Academic writing most often assumes a position of certainty. The academic ethnographer is competent and secure in his or her arguments. As a magazine writer, I try to mix interpretive authority with awe. Awe, naiveté, and a sense of wonder—I believe—must be present in magazine ethnographic writing because those are arguably the affective forces pushing a reader to want to 'travel' with me in a particular lifeworld. Both the articles I mentioned are, in fact, underscored by a certain 'How in the world do these people do what they do?' tone, which is typical of the ethnographic imagination. Affective modes, of course, must be driven by the particular content of a study.

For all my writing—academic and popular—I use the present tense. The present tense allows for writing to be situated in a clear temporal and spatial frame, as if it were happening as the actual experience unfolds. The present tense, especially in its subjunctive mode, also allows for relations and actions in the field to unravel in an open-ended manner, without a determinate or even probable end. The past tense, while it is a definite aid in longer narration and while it is de rigueur in reporting the past, has a tendency to make events, experiences, utterances, and actions factual, as if closed to interpretation or alternative ways of unfolding. Moreover, ethnographic magazine writing, in contrast to ethnographic academic writing, should in my mind allow for no tense shifts of the kind that is customary in academic writing (e.g. 'I will show how...', 'I collected data by...').

Finally, whereas academic ethnographic writing generally ends by fizzling out with a litany of apologies for limitations, suggestions for future research, synopses, and repetitions, magazine writing should end with a proper *denouement*. A *denouement* is a narrative resolution, a way of 'untying' the narrative thread. Different resolutions are demanded of different kinds of narratives, of course, but in general, I prefer to bring the spotlight back onto my 'informant(s)' and let him or her have the final word. For that, I choose a quote that encapsulates the wisdom of the lessons his or her ways of life teach us.

Multimodal content

Magazines accept more than just writing. Photography can accompany printed pieces, and audio and video content can supplement web-based pieces. This can give visual, audio, and multimodal ethnographic data great exposure. For example, the video accompanying

the 'Outsmarting the meter' article (Vannini, 2012d) has been viewed (at this writing time) about 2000 times. Certainly, not as often as some YouTube hip hop videos—and not even as frequently as the actual written article, which has been accessed about 15,000 times—but still not bad at all! Now, my space allocations here do not permit me to examine in depth the dissemination of ethnographic research via visual and aural media, but I do want to provide some reflections on multimodal composition for magazines.

First, web-based magazine written content can generate interest in and can direct web traffic to additional audio and visual creations. Uploading a video on YouTube or Vimeo, or an audio file on SoundCloud, is easy enough these days that any ethnographer with web access can do it. The Internet is full of interesting content and audience attention is hard to get. Thus, embedding a video in a magazine article, as my collaborator Jonathan Taggart and I have done for 'Cutting the cord' and 'Outsmarting the meter', can help with directing general audiences' attention to these other media.

Second, magazines can give exposure to ethnographic photography in different ways than journals and books. For example, the article 'Off-grid world' published in *Yukon: North of Ordinary* (Vannini and Taggart, 2012) features photography that most journal editors would have discounted for its lack of unanalyzed visual data content. The magazine editor, on the contrary, sought to publish photographs that were aesthetically rich and painted a beautiful picture of the places we visited. Because the quarterly publication is Air North's official magazine, the photos were seen and appreciated by tens of thousands more readers than an academic article.

Third, web-based magazines (or traditional magazines with duplicate web content) allow for informants to speak in their own words and with their own voices via audio clips. For example, in 'Living off-the-grid in BC' (Vannini, 2012e), I uploaded on SoundCloud short audio segments from interviews and hyperlinked them. Readers interested in hearing bits of conversations as they actually unfolded can follow the hyperlinks and listen on their computers. These 'digital audio footnotes' also let me, as an ethnographer keen on sharing richer data, publish longer excerpts than I can otherwise do through short transcribed quotes. Besides relaying the words as spoken, these clips also convey interesting elements of the soundscape in which an interview takes place. In sum, audio, photography, and video—in many ways explained here but also in innumerable other ways—can therefore enrich the ethnographic offering of magazines, complement writing, and provide newer opportunities for ethnographic composition.

Blogs

In the do-it-yourself (DIY) Internet world, the prospect of self-publishing by creating a website or maintaining a blog is certainly tantalizing. In my experience, these publications have a limited audience and, without constant publicity efforts and regular updates, they risk quick obsolescence and eventual oblivion. This does not mean that ethnographic blogs are inefficient uses of academics' time. Rather, it means that blogging must be done strategically and systematically. In this brief section, I want to highlight select ways in which—in my experience—a blog can be useful.

A blog—or web log—is essentially a journal, not unlike a field journal or research diary. In most cases, ethnographic projects consist of long periods of data collection in the

field followed by long periods of analysis and composition. The very extension through time of an ethnographic project makes it a perfect candidate for blogging. Obviously, a field journal contains private matters. whereas a blog features only the information that can be filtered to the public but, aside from this important difference, a personal journal and a blog can be similar in many ways by serving as outlets for sharing ideas, raw observations, fieldwork updates, key readings, fresh discoveries, news about publications, and some 'behind-the-scene' methodological narrations. Whenever a comment feature is enabled—or at least whenever the blogger is easy enough to contact by email—these 'write-as-you-go' fragments of the ethnographic life can serve as 'trials' for working arguments, writing styles, and so on, to which an audience can give feedback.

In my experience, my blog (http://publicethnography.net/off-the-grids-blog) has also benefited me in other ways. First, by posting a frequently asked questions (FAQs) page (http://publicethnography.net/off-the-grids-blog/faqs-what-are-we), I can quickly direct colleagues, prospective informants, and members of the media to what I have been doing without repeating myself too much over time. This FAQs page has made it easier for many newspaper journalists to interview me and gather the necessary information about my research as well, reducing the likelihood of misunderstanding. Second, by posting information about the field sites I am going to visit in advance of travel, I have been able to recruit additional research participants who have contacted me to ask me to visit them. Third, by aggregating on my blog all the various radio and newspaper appearances, as well as providing links to magazine articles I have written or media material co-produced with my collaborator, I have provided enough content—and regularly updated content as well—to attract and maintain a sizeable readership over time. This audience, and this my fourth point, has had enough time to accumulate over the months and years so that the publication of the book will (hopefully) appeal to them as a familiar and long-awaited offering.

Finally, and I believe this an especially important point, by seeking aggregation with the *Huffington Post* (Vannini and Taggart, n.d.), I have gathered a larger audience than my blog alone can conquer. The *Huffington Post* publishes magazine and newspaper-style articles as well as numerous blog posts aggregated from a variety of users who take advantage of that site's great traffic. Among others, anthropologist Paul Stoller (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/paul-stoller/) has taken effective advantage of this medium. The sizeable audience of the *Huffington Post* has given me enough reason to invest time in more elaborate written and even video posts which—by virtue of cross-links—can then generate more traffic for my own blog as well. Blogs in sum—at least in my experience—are largely a labor of love with uneven and unpredictable use value, but through the application of a few strategies and some care and attention they can offer a big payoff in return for a small investment.

Conclusion: risks, warnings, and limitations

As articulated in the introduction to this issue, ethnographers have a lot to gain from reaching wider audiences. Writing for the audiences typically reached by magazines can allow ethnographers to engage in public education, can increase the potential of their work to achieve social and cultural transformation, can guarantee their fieldwork greater

levels of visibility, and can even teach them new 'tricks' by exposing them to different media formats, genres, and technologies. It can also expose them to some level of risk, and I feel compelled to conclude this otherwise optimistic and encouraging reflection by outlining some limitations of this kind of communication.

The first risk is misunderstanding. By writing in popular magazines, an ethnographer risks being seen by the general public as simply another type of journalist, and this may affect their legitimacy and may expose them to unwarranted criticism. General audiences may not understand or appreciate the level of rigor followed in all interviewing and participant observation procedures, the amount of fieldwork undertaken, and the depth of theoretical and epistemological preparation typical of the ethnographic trade. This may subject their position in the academy to crude criticism ('How is this science?!'), for example, or similar misplaced disapproval.

The second risk is of an ethical nature. By writing for limited circulation journals and books, ethnographers are protected by narrow exposure. Things change when 'they read' what 'we write about them' (Brettell 1996). Having suddenly gained a new audience means we must become a lot more sensitive to delicate issues of representation, which may at times influence our arguments and even dull our critical edges. Magazines also generate much greater personal exposure for our informants than our typical writings do, which can increase our potential to do harm. For instance, for all my magazine writing, I have not used fictitious names for my informants (magazine editors abhor fictitious names). This is something that I cleared well in advance with all my informants—who are generally very proud of their lifestyles and actually do want exposure—but it is something that must be dealt with very gingerly in different cases. To lessen risk, I ask informants for explicit approval of my writing. I share with informants my initial submission and the copyedited version of the article and ask them to check on factual accuracy and the appropriateness of my representation. All of this is of course done in compliance with my university's Human Subjects Review Board.

Finally—but I fully realize that many more risks could be listed—there is always the risk of sensationalizing a story to make it more interesting. Academic audiences may or may not care to read good writing; what they care about after all is not entertainment. Magazine editors generally want to sell audiences to advertisers in order to meet a bottom line. Our work thus risks being featured alongside articles on losing weight quickly or on crooners' beautiful homes. To compete with this more traditionally popular material, ethnographers may feel pressured to make rhetorical choices that exaggerate their field stories. Furthermore, there is always the risk that getting paid for our work might deepen these vicious tendencies.

In spite of these and other challenges, I do believe that ethnographers have a lot to learn from reaching out to broader audiences. I have personally gained great satisfaction in seeing that my writing is read, for the first time, by friends, relatives, and neighbors and in hearing that they understood and appreciated my narratives and arguments. I have also been able to give exposure to my young university, something that administrators have greatly appreciated. Most important of all, I feel I have served well the cause of public education by stressing, in my case, the importance of issues like energy conservation and sustainability through positive stories. I will admit it has been a fun learning experience too.

Funding

Funding for the research mentioned in this article has been provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

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