

Week 6: Ethnography – studying what people do with things



Overview

- Ethnography: **history** and **development**
- Ethnographies of **media** and **audiences**
- Ethnographies of **users** and **things**
- Group research work
- Preparation for interview with an ethnographer
- Interview with Lucy Suchman

Review

- Semiotics and textual methods
- Discourse analysis – saying and seeing; statements and practices;
- Little emphasis here on audiencing, spectating, using, etc.

Ethnography – general

- Main method in cultural/social anthropology; very important in urban sociology, media sociology and cultural studies
- Focuses on **one** case or place
- Sustained **personal** contact between researcher and people they research
- Looks at the **whole situation**
- Notion of '**field site**' develops in late 19 century, based on 'field sciences' (like geology)

The 'field'

- 'the field' in 20th century anthropology usually meant somewhere remote (New Guinea, Uganda, etc.)
- 'the field' in late 20th century ethnography included places close to home
- Choice of field often affected by problems of access (who, where, when)



Ethnography as method for studying media in the social world

- 2 approaches
 - Study how audiences make sense of media
 - Study how media circulate and act in the world as things

Ethnographic studies of audiences, fans, and users

- Observe how **audiences** make sense ('decoding' – Hall) of particular media, and how their sense-making relates to social and cultural identity
- Explore how **fans** **closely observe**, interpret and **transform across media** (tv, music, blogs, etc)
- Examine how **users** move across media in '**convergence cultures**' (Jenkins), as does **content**

How to study audiences

- Earlier studies (1980s on) tend to use **interviews** that explore how people make sense of media
- One-on-one; family; group;
- Selection of people to interview will be shaped by what you think is important (class, gender, etc.)
- Analysis of interviews – reading and reading; identify different clusters of meaning; link clusters to social or discursive positions

How to study audiences ethnographically

- Observe, listen and talk to people as they go about everyday lives
- Involves extended periods of time spent in 'the field'
- 'data' is gathered primarily by taking notes (sometimes photos and audio recording), and then writing notes up

Ethnography and media objects

- Much ethnography focuses on what people do and make (images, objects, etc)
- Study what people do with things (devices, technologies, products) in order to understand social relations and identities.
- More focused on people as 'users' than as 'audience'

How to ethnographically study things like media?

- Pay attention to **where and how** media objects engage people: visual form, material form, presentational form
- Examine how **things and people are co-constituted**: look at what is actually done where, and by whom
- Track **mobility** of things and how they are **re-contextualised**: look at the same thing in different places (public, private)

Exercise – ethnography of 'users'

- Go to Learning Zone and observe how people are using images and text
- Write notes on the place, the visual forms, the material forms, how people sit, talk, and whatever else they do.
-

Digital ethnography: access new places

There's been a lot of talk about how digital technologies are changing qualitative research. My past work was focussed on exploring a transnational Muslim music subculture with a complex, geographically distributed organizational structure (Murthy, 2010, 2012). Because of high levels of Islamophobia in Europe, the USA, and Canada, musicians in this subculture turned to MySpace, Facebook, and Twitter to interact with each other and their fans. Some of the participants of this subculture only engaged in these online spaces due to apprehensions about attending physical events. Others used these online spaces to augment their participation in this subculture.

Murthy, 2013, 26

different platforms with different sub-cultures, etc

Digital ethnography as engagement

My research has also leveraged blog technologies to keep private and public field notes. As I have written about my specific implementation of blogs and e-fieldnotes elsewhere (Murthy, 2011), I will only briefly mention my use of them. Using a WordPress-powered blog[1], I created public entries regarding my research and invited participants to respond via comments to blog posts or via e-mail. I recruited several respondents after their interactions with my research blog. Additionally, the Google Maps/Flickr mashup and the stream of related tweets from Twitter were embedded into the blog. The use of this blog was an important aspect of my combination of digital with conventional ethnographic methods. It is also a prime example of how digital work is not a threat to face-to-face work, but rather can augment the ways in which ethnographic work is publicly disseminated. Importantly, several of my respondents appreciated the existence of the blog as it provided one way in which they could see where my research was going and they felt more invested in the research by seeing concrete manifestations of its progress. I have used my work to highlight some

Digital ethnography as new mode of writing

- Digital media as both object of research *and* research tool
- Smartphones permit use of video and audio as documentation
- Digital devices offer new ways of being present in the field
- New ethical challenges -- how to anonymize?

Exercise: 'the field' in your group research project

- Discuss actual places nearby that could be ethnographic field sites for your group research project
- How could you explore 'decoding' processes there?
- What kinds of mobility or circulation of media could you observe, and how would you document them?
- Write up these notes for your group research project online

Interview preparation

- In your groups, construct 3 questions about doing ethnography, with a particular focus on
 - How to write ethnographically
 - How study people's relation to things
 - This quote: 'configuration orients us to the entanglement of imaginaries and artefacts that comprise technological projects (Suchman 2012: 57).'

different entanglements of imaginaries and 'artefacts.' Document these using screen shots, quotes or some other empirical material on your group research project blog. Describe how the examples can be understood in terms of configuration.