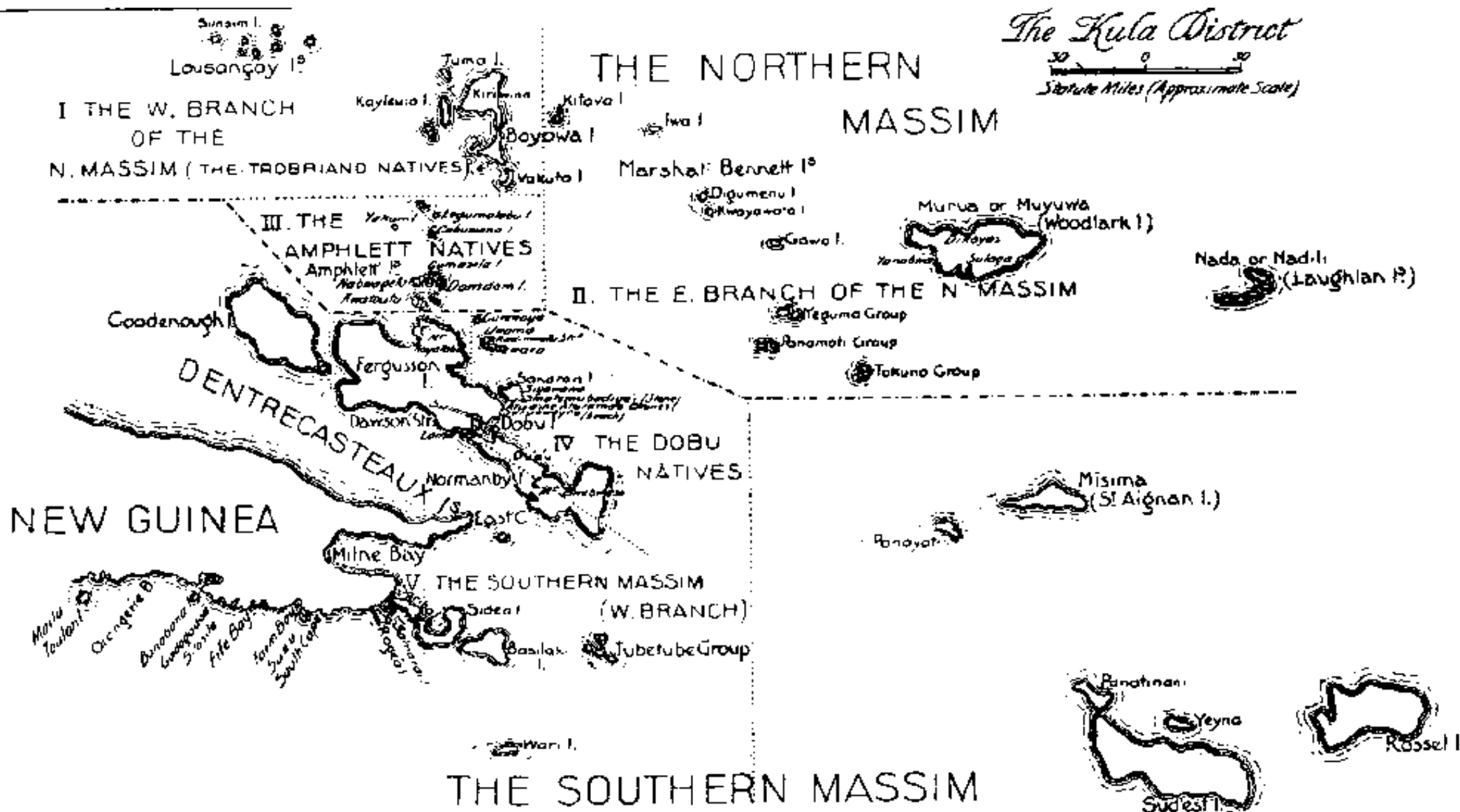# Week 6: Ethnography – studying what people do with things

Overview

- **Ethnography: history and development**
- **Ethnographies of media and audiences**
- **Ethnographies of people and things**
- **Group research work**
- **Preparation for interview with an ethnographer**
- **Interview with Adam Fish**

Review

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

Ethnography – general

ethno: nation, people, culture
(things, network)

graph: draw, write, (narrate, record, chronicle)

ethnography: writing, drawing, (telling) about the people, phenomenon, network

Ethnography: *the scientific description of races and peoples, with their customs, habits and mutual differences*

(Shorter OED 5th ed, 2002)

Ethnography uses **a range of tools and techniques** to write, record, draw the 'people, culture, network'….

Why?

- **Because what people/networks *say/project*, and what they *do* are different**
- **Because a sensitive, reflexive account can only be made by 'being there'**

How?

By becoming part of the everyday life of the people, group, network

But **scrupulous, methodological reflexivity is essential**……….the careful, detailed account of the researcher's positioning allows the ethnography to claim a (modest) *objectivity,* rather than the presumed subjectivism of qualitative work

Haraway (1988) Situated Knowledges: the science question in feminism and the privilege of the partial perspective

Ethnography as writing practice

The making of ethnography is artisanal, tied to the worldy work of writing (Clifford 1986: 6).

Cultures are not scientific 'objects' (assuming such things exist, even in the natural sciences). Culture, and our views of 'it,' are produced historically, and are actively contested (Clifford 1986: 18).

Ethnography – general

- Main method in cultural/social anthropology; very important in urban sociology, media sociology and cultural studies

- Focuses on one case or place – the 'field site' where an ethnographer does 'fieldwork'

- Sustained personal contact between researcher and people they research

- Looks at the whole situation over time

The 'field'

- **Notion of 'field site' develops in late 19 century, based on 'field sciences' (like geology)**

- **'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)**

When/where is ethnography?

- 'Single' site studies (e.g. one hospital)
- Multi-sited ethnography (life world, system) - following things, metaphors, conflicts between placed
- Digital/virtual ethnography - online worlds: "a-sited", uncertain of time, location, presence
  - But are online/offline worlds not coexistent?

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
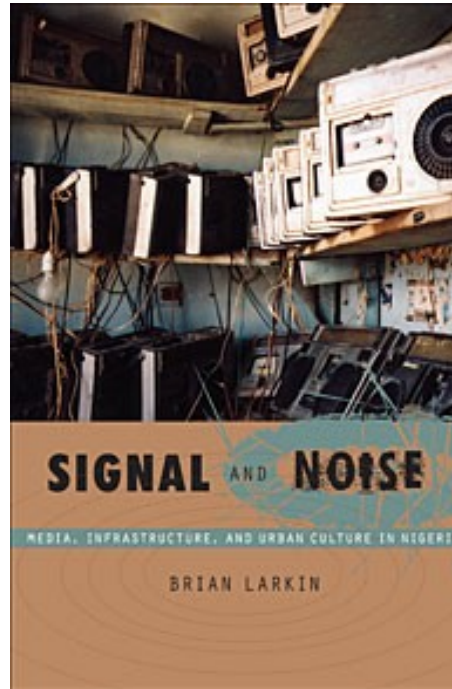
How people make sense of media
Ethnographic studies of audiences, fans, and users

- 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' as does content (see Fish, reading for today!)

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)**

Digital ethnography: access new places

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

- **Ethnographers use digital platforms to relate to their field sites**
  - Widen the range of participants
  - Deal with sensitive issues around identity

Murthy,
2013, 27

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

- List **three specific places** that you could study (given a few weeks!) as ethnographic field sites for your group research project

- List some of the **people** you would want to meet, talk to and spend time with in these places.

- List some of the **things, artefacts, practices or events** you would want to observe or participate in as an ethnographer.

- How would you address the problems of **access** to sub-cultures, elites, niche social movements or marginal/vulnerable groups?

- Write 300-500 words documenting the above.

Interview preparation

- **In your groups, construct 3 questions about doing ethnography, with a particular focus on**
  - How to participate in field sites ethnographically
  - How study people's relation to each other and to things (platforms, devices, etc.)

Next week

- **'Live methods'**
- **Recent work on digital ethnography and digital methods**