Ethnography for new media studies: a field report of its weaknesses and benefits

David Domingo (dds@fll.urv.es)
Lecturer, Communication Studies, Universitat Rovira i Virgili (Tarragona, Spain)
Academic co-ordinator, Master in Online Journalism, Universitat Oberta de Catalunya

Abstract

The use of ethnographical methods to research new media offers fruitful descriptions and valuable data to interpret the uses of communication technologies. The benefits and weaknesses of participant observation are discussed from the point of view of a concrete research experience: a study of online publications and newsrooms, currently under development.

Introduction

At this maturing stage of new media studies, when we are still building up our theoretical framework and mapping the areas worth to explore, there is the need to put to test significant methodologies in order to check their effectiveness in answering relevant research questions. There is not much experience in the use of ethnography in sociotechnical research and even less in new media studies (Cottle, 1999; Boczkowski, 2002), but current research limitations and the results of ethnographical work in other technological environments suggest that participant observation may be a good tool for our analyses.

In this paper I will discuss the benefits and weaknesses I have detected in my own experience with ethnographic techniques. I am conducting a study of online journalism newsroom routines and product definitions, trying to overcome the limitations of the research in this area. Online journalism studies have been mainly restricted to quantitative content analysis of web sites, based on simplistic parameterizations of features like interactivity, hypertextuality and multimediality (Jankowski and Van Selm, 2000). The results of these studies usually state that online publications have failed to take advantage of the Internet communication capabilities and tend to reproduce traditional media schemas. But they fail to explain the causes
of this “poor” use of the Internet, because it is not possible to find the reasons exploring only the products.

The aim of my research is to go beyond this content analyses and get as close as possible to the producers of online publications in order to find the answer to some big questions about online journalism. I want to know:

- Why do media companies produce the online publications the way they are doing now?
- How have online publications evolved and what factors have influenced this evolution?
- Are there differences between online and “traditional” journalists’ working routines?
- Does the tradition of a media company (newspaper, broadcaster, Internet-born) influence the shape of its online products?

In communication studies there is a strong tradition in researching media producers. Since the end of the 1960s, sociologists conducted participant observation inside newsrooms in order to explain how working routines biased news (Manning, 2001). These studies, usually known as “sociology of newsmaking” described the mechanisms used by journalists to overcome uncertainty and to gain productivity, explained how this routines affected sources access to media and news formats, and desmythified the most sacred word in journalism - objectivity. But this research tradition paid little attention to the role of technology in the newsrooms and thus it does not give us any theoretical framework to analyze the process of a new technology entering the communication arena (Cottle, 1999). Another important research tradition in the discipline, history of communication, has thoroughly described the technological evolution of media (Winston, 1998). However, it has a macro point of view that makes it very difficult to use it as a methodological referent for a research project based on present newsrooms.

The research in technological innovation has been addressed from several perspectives (Lievrouw, 2002). Reviewing the bibliography of the field I found common ground with newsmaking research in sociotechnical change studies, a multidisciplinary tradition born in the mid 1980s with roots in sociology, anthropology and history (Bijker and Law, 1992). This discipline states that technologies are a social construction of evolving nature that necessarily have to be analyzed in the social context where they are invented or adopted. This way, the researcher can explain the reasons why the same technology is used differently in different social groups. Sociotechnical change studies also try to explain how technology and society are mutually shaped by the other. Researchers in this tradition have built a robust theoretical framework that -oversimplifying- understands the social context of a technology as a group of actors with different levels of knowledge, converging or conflicting interests and social relations. These factors influence actors’ definitions of a technology and the final shape of tools, routines and roles associated to the use of it.
Ethnography, document analysis and in-depth interviews are the main research methods of sociotechnical change studies. Their constructive definition of the object of study asks for qualitative approaches able to gather data about social relations, actors' actions and discourses, work environments... The coherence of their principles with my research aims and their theoretical and methodological nearness to the sociology of newsmaking persuaded me to try and combine both traditions. In my research, ethnography is one of the tools to achieve the answers to the stated questions.

**Research design**

The concrete strategy of analysis is directly inspired in a proposal of the technology anthropologist Mahias (1993). Her aim was to explain variations in pottery techniques and products in a region of India. The leap to online media is easier than it may seem: Pottery might be a simpler technology than the Internet, but both have a set of artifacts, definitions, routines and social roles. Mahias proposal was to start the analysis with the final outcome of the technology, the product: vessels in her case, news websites in my study. The aim should be to detect the differences between products of various producers. Once detected, the focus would be put on the work of the potters (journalists in my case), in order to find variations in production routines, tasks and technology definitions. These variations could explain the differences between products, but they should be put in their social context to be interpreted. An examination of the context and the history of the technology would help to understand the origin of the present differences, which are the result of “technological choices” of the actors even if they are not aware of having made choices.

The proposed strategy addresses the main research aims of my study in a very effective way. It implies re-constructing the evolution of concrete cases of a technology in use, starting in the end, with the bare facts -the differences in the products-, and then going backwards to find the decisions that made up the different ways of understanding and using the technology. I needed several methods of analysis to effectively translate this philosophy of research to online media:

- **Content analysis:** The first phase of the study was aimed at detecting differences between several chosen news websites. As I have stated before, content analysis has been the main approach to online media. Therefore I could build on that experience to design the relevant variables to be analyzed in each website. The result was a descriptive grid of features that allowed for the systematic spotting of differences.

- **Ethnography:** The use of participant observation as the method for the second phase (current work of my research at the moment of writing this lines on June 2003) is coherent with the approach of sociotechnical change studies, but also with the research tradition of newsmaking studies. Newsrooms are a well-documented fieldwork for ethnography, and this helps in defining the observation strategy. Nevertheless,
ethnography is not the only suitable method to detect variations in routines and definitions of new media technologies: Surveys, focus groups, in-depth interviews could also help. But a constructive approach to technology, which is the theoretical framework I assume as basic, asks for a deep and close study of cases, in order to be able to fully understand the social context that builds around technology. Participant observation is the technique used by sociotechnical change studies when they face a current case (Latour, 1993), as my object of study. Differences detected in the content analysis help to set the attention in the activities that may be the reason of those differences. The benefits and weaknesses of this method are discussed in the next section of this paper.

- **In-depth interviews and documents analysis:** One of the limitations of participant observation is that it is focused in the present situation of a concrete case. Through observation you can guess previous decisions and conflicts that have led to the current development of the technology, but methods of history are sharper in reconstructing the evolution of the case from its very beginning. In-depth interviews with people relevant to the decision-making processes (many of them not usually involved in newsroom routines, such as the online media manager, the technical division director, or the editor of the offline traditional medium) and the analysis of internal documents of the project complete the research design. This third phase will guarantee that a historical perspective is built into the interpretation of variations between online media. Ethnographical data obtained in the second phase will be essential to prepare the interviews: Participant observation lets me identify the relevant actors of the present situation and they will be surely among the interviewees. But it also offers me enough information to build interview questions and to be aware of probable exaggerations or misleading statements about the project that interviewees can bring into their discourse.

This research design requires a small group of samples, a case study approach, to be workable. Since one of the main objectives of the study is to explain the reasons of the differences and similitudes between different media traditions when facing online media products, four different projects were selected, all from the same geographical region, Catalonia, in the North-east of Spain:

- A purely online project: laMalla.net
- A newspaper online venture: ElPeriodico.com
- A broadcaster online portal: Telenoticies.com
- A local newspaper online version: DiarideTarragona.com

Each of the chosen projects is regarded to be one of the best news websites of its kind by Catalan online journalism forums. This sampling size allows me to do a deep analysis of each of the cases and, at the same time, to be able to interpret the results with a comparative aim.
Participant observation was conducted from January to June 2003, consisting in 5 stages of 3 days in each of the four newsrooms. Approximately each week of the month three days were spent in one of the newsrooms. Longer stages (weeks and even months) in a single spot are common in ethnography. But I decided to limit them to 3 days and scatter them in 6 months because of logistic and epistemological reasons. Having four observation locations, I could have spent some weeks in each of them. But I wanted to have a time perspective in the ethnography, as in the whole research. This weekly rotation allowed me to visit every media company from month to month, and this helped to detect more easily if the product or the routines were evolving. Also, my teaching activities at the university limited the days of the week to work on my research to four. I decided to leave one day for transcribing and analyzing activities and three for participant observation.

Following the directions of ethnography methodological debates (Lindlof, 1995), I concluded that the initial period of my observation (which is the hardest in many cases because the researcher has to learn the rules, routines, roles and spaces of the social group he/she wants to analyze) would be shorter than most of other ethnographical studies. As a journalism student, researcher and professional, I already know the professional mindset of journalism and the routines of newsmaking. I also know the common definitions of online media, vastly shared by many online journalists, and the technical skills and tools needed to produce news for the Internet. Thus, I am not a sociologist entering a brand new world for him, but a professional who tries to take an analytical point of view of a well-known reality. This has its risks, as I will discuss below, but the benefit is that observation does not need to take very long to be worthy. 3-day periods allowed me to see the full life cycle of many news items. Furthermore, journalistic work has a strongly routinized and repetitive dynamics, which allows the researcher looking into the same actions many times in only one day.

Ethnography discussed from my own experience

At the moment of writing this paper the participant observation phase of my research is almost over, and probably too close to fully evaluate its worthiness and problems. But the daily struggle with the method procedures already gives me some relevant clues about what it is good for and what you need to be aware of when conducting ethnographies in our research area. The discussion of this personal experience can be grouped in three different aspects of ethnography: data gathering, research focus and relationship with actors.

Data gathering

Participant observation gives the researcher loads of raw, first-hand data. An inexperienced researcher like me would at first go numb: There’s too much to see, hear and understand. Journalists in an online newsroom do not talk very often; everyone is concentrated in his/her
computer, doing some tasks at the same time in implicit coordination with some other mates in the room. The first explanations of the editor who granted access to the newsroom are not enough to understand every step of what is going on. But after relaxing a bit, asking some questions to the journalists at work and detecting repetitions in their tasks, routines start to clearly emerge from the thousands of actions they perform. Once you grasp the rhythm of the newsroom quiet observation of the actors is a very worthy way to examine the routines of the newsroom. You go around the desks following the flow of tasks, some of them parallel, some completely independent, some consecutive... At first I would rather look and see, without taking notes, in order to be witness of every little task. When I got home I tried to reconstruct in the field diary what I have seen, but it was so difficult to transcribe 8 hours of actions just recalling my memory. It is worth to take with you a small notebook to set down the actions as detailed as possible right in the observation spot. This is quite easy to do while you are just going around and quietly looking at what are the actors doing.

The most difficult data to set down is the description of the concrete actions undertaken by the actors in their computers. It's easy to explain the aim of the actions (publishing a news piece, searching for a link, editing a photograph), but coding the buttons they press and the options they choose is a very detailed work difficult to do if you don't know the tools on first hand. To become familiar with the web content management software used in each of the newsrooms I asked for access to the management system whenever possible. If there was a free computer they would allow me, and this way I could not only explore the differences between the systems but also had a greater control on what was going on at any time, because I had access to the list of unpublished news pieces. This way I could follow more easily the actual workflow, combining the observation of the actors in the newsroom with the observation of the system logs.

Casual conversations with the actors are another source of very useful data. Here the notebook has usually to be set apart during the conversation and picked up as soon as possible after finishing it to transcribe it respecting the words of the actor, because the way he or she speaks about routines and artifacts can be very important to understand the way he or she uses the technology. There are two main conversational situations: at work and off-work. The first gives mainly the definition of what the journalist is doing, because the researcher has asked him/her or because he/she feels that an action needs to be justified at the eyes of the researcher. It is interesting to set down this difference in the field diary. Put in the context of the quiet observation, these casual conversations can be very explanatory.

The second conversational situation was an extraordinary finding for me: spending coffee breaks and lunch time with a group of journalists (usually without the presence of the editor) opened the door to off-work informal conversations that led to many confessions about job expectations, social relations, product definition conflicts and routines criticism. Journalists would openly criticize their editor and talk about what they would like the project to be. This is a very sensible material, because actors tend to assume that when the researcher is out of the
newsroom he/she is not working, like them. Sometimes they explicitly claim to have told you an off-the-record statement and ask you not to publish it in your study. I transcribe all this conversations in the notebook, with an “off-the-record” mark when it is the case. This material is very worthy for the researcher even if you accept not to publish it: It offers you new foci when observing the newsroom, and gives you possible hypothesis to explain what you are observing. Obviously, any confession of an actor can be interested and misleading and the researcher must put them in context to understand the actor’s words.

These off-work conversations usually help to understand professional/social relations within the group and ongoing conflicts, but the researcher him/herself can easily witness a concrete episode of a conflict when conducting participant observation. Sometimes the conflict is obvious: Suddenly the editor shouts at the phone, and after hanging up he or she explains you what is wrong with the technical department director. Other times its very subtle: Why does a journalist work doing the minimum effort? You hardly notice this until the editor tells you that he/she worries about that journalist and when the journalist talks you about his/her ambition of working for the paper -not the website- in the media company. Conflict situations are a very rich source of information about social structure, competing definitions of technology and power relations inside the studied group of actors.

It is useful to rewrite field notes in a computer as soon as possible when you go out of the newsroom. The field diary is then more complete, because you can reconstruct what you have seen, heard and interpreted without the urgency of on-site notes. Here your memory works better and you can easily complete what your notes were not able to set down. This rewriting work is very time-consuming and the temptation is to leave it aside if you feel you have good notes. I tried to schedule my visits to the newsrooms in a way that would leave me the evening or the morning to rewrite my notes, but sometimes I had to leave the work until the end of the 3-days period, losing details in the field diary. As journalists’ work is very routinized, the actions of one day easily overlapped in my memory with the ones of the other.

Research focus

The field diary is considered to be the main working material in an ethnographic research. It sets down in a mainly descriptive way the experience of the observer in the field. Analysis and interpretation are usually left to a second moment in the research, detached from the context of observation to allow a calm work through the gathered data. In fact, methodologists recommend the researcher to avoid immediate interpretation of what he/she is seeing (Lindlof, 1995; Jensen, 2002). Moreover, an initial general overview of the actors and their routines is the most sensible way to start the observation. This would help to escape from the main risks of an ethnography: taking an anecdote as a general rule and putting our own prejudices in the observation. If you let something impress you too much, you may focus your observation on that specific phenomenon, losing perspective of its relevance in the processes as a whole. Part
of the work of the observer is to map routines, because these will be the main corpus for the analysis. Starting with a general overview of the processes forces you to be inclusive, producing a holistic picture that will be very useful in the analysis phase. An anecdote set down in the filed diary in this context will be clearly interpreted as what it is.

To keep away prejudices is probably the most difficult exercise in the research fieldwork. The only way I have found to fight them away is to be aware of them. I am very critical with the online media strategies that most companies are developing. I could argue with the actors of my research about lots of the decisions they do everyday. But I rather shut up and leave the comments to my notebook: “I have seen the journalist doing this. I would have done it otherwise”. The fact is that the bigger effort must been done when your prejudices coincide with the actors behavior, in order to grasp what you take for granted. If you are not aware of your prejudices, you can forget writing up in the notebook an actor’s decision because you do not see it as a decision but a natural fact (just as he/she does). This means that the researcher must be very awake and self-conscious to be a good observer.

Looking at everything that is happening in the field is very tiring, even more if you need to be self-conscious all the time. Broad guidelines can help to focus your efforts after the first broad picture of the field. Because of my research questions, I decided that my main interests in the newsrooms should be journalistic routines and the use of technological tools. The fact is that differences detected in the products analysis did not offer me concrete foci for participant observation, just some research questions that only would be answered after the global analysis of the ethnographical data.

Sociotechnical change theories teach that many social factors can be involved in a decision and this is why I am open to get into technical details talking to a programmer in the company or into marketing strategies with the editor. These issues do not fit my initial intentions, but they can help to understand journalistic decisions. An open-minded observation can help to detect these lateral issues and devote some efforts in the final stages to know them deeper enough.

Theoretical frameworks are useful to guide you towards what is relevant to your research interests. They work like glasses you wear and shadow parts of the scene and sharpen others. But once again, like prejudices, the researcher should be aware of this framework and stop it from fully interpreting the actions. A mostly descriptive approach is enough in the field. Interpretations based on the theoretical framework can start to be brought in when reading the field diary. This is a good exercise before returning to the field, in order to construct intuitions to be verified and to refocus the observation towards poorly explored areas. Full theoretical analysis of the gathered data arrives when the observation period is over.

**Relationship with the actors**
I did not have to set up any strategy to have the journalists telling me confidences in the coffee brakes. I could not explain how did it work out, but what I have already found is that there was an initial ingenuity in the actors about my research that they rapidly lose. Ethnographical researchers usually describe as a tough job to gain the actors confidence in order to see how do they really behave, without acting a different play when the researcher is among them (Lindlof, 1995). Online journalists surprised me because they treated me like a colleague from the very beginning, maybe because it was easier for them to think of me as a journalist than as a researcher. When days passed by and my presence as a researcher was more evident -they would see me taking notes all the time, I would ask things that could be interpreted by them as critical to the way they work- the initial colleague relationship got colder.

The fact is that participant observation is incommoding. People are not used to being observed and they mostly would prefer not being observed. Depending on the dynamics of the newsroom I could become invisible more easily. Big workplaces let you go around quite freely, because everyone is doing their business, quite stressed to notice you. In the smaller ones, some journalists got angry if I looked what they were doing without telling them, just stepping at their back. The strategy in these cases was to get close to them and asking for what they were doing. This was an interesting exercise, because they would define with their own words the actions they were performing. The key is finding the balance between quite observation -which reduces the researcher intervention in the scene and satisfies the editors because does not interrupt the workflow- and commented activity. Sometimes it is not easy to find the right moment to ask for an explanation for something puzzling that you are seeing.

As the actors became aware of me as a researcher, I did not detect a shift in their routines, but in their willingness to collaborate. They sometimes seemed tired of my presence and in a newsroom started to name me the “UN blue helmet”. The fact that the editors had given me access to the newsroom could be interpreted by journalists as I was “working” for their bosses and maybe giving them reports on their performance. Whenever someone suggested that my task was “controlling” them I insisted that I was just learning how they worked, not judging them.

In the last stages there was another step in our relationship: actors started asking me about the other newsrooms and about my conclusions on them. These are risky questions to answer, because you still have no conclusions, but I felt I had to answer them as the price for observing them. One of the consequences I feared most was influencing their views and their definitions. Stating my points of view I could alter what I was observing. But in the end, after some conversations about the research with some of the actors I concluded that these colloquia were worthy if you used them properly. For example, I gave them some data about the other newsrooms and asked them what did they think about that. The answers were very fruitful indirect justifications of their own decisions.

In all four newsrooms I offered myself to work some day with them, participating in the routines. This observation as a participant in one of the possible research strategies in
ethnography. I preferred a passive observer role because it fitted better the context of the media companies and granted an easier access than asking them for a workplace for me as participant. But, once there, I found that the possibility of trying the participant role for some hours or days could be interesting. Only at one newsroom journalists let me work with them. In the others, lack of space or a more ambiguous excuse was given to my offering.

**Conclusion**

Summing up the pros and cons of ethnography (table 1) that have been analyzed in this paper through my own research experience, my general impression is positive and I would recommend to use participant observation as a crucial tool to get a deeper understanding of new media development, uses and social meaning. New media research must go beyond the computer screen and find the people behind it, meet them in their social context and let them show how does technology fit in their worlds.

The only caution that has to be taken with the results of an ethnography is keeping in mind that they are case studies and therefore straight generalization of conclusions is not advisable. This is the reason why ethnography is especially useful to explore a new research territory, in order to look for more accurate research questions and to build a comprehensive description of a process.

**Table 1. Benefits and weaknesses of ethnographic methodology**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Benefits</th>
<th>Weaknesses</th>
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<tr>
<td>Gathers a huge amount of very rich first-hand data.</td>
<td>Participant observation is time-consuming and many times actors feel incommmoded by the presence of the researcher.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The researcher directly witnesses actions, routines, and definitions of technology and social relations.</td>
<td>It is not always easy to set down everything that you witness. Technical actions are maybe the most difficult.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The researcher can gain a confident status with the actors, obtaining sincere insiders points of view.</td>
<td>Actors may ask you not to quote a confession they have made you.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The researcher can witness conflicts and processes of evolution.</td>
<td>Results should not be generalized straight away and you have the risk of taking an anecdote as a rule.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Analysis of the gathered data allows a comprehensive description of the social use of a technology and offers insights to understand the factors involved in its social construction and shaping.</td>
<td>The researcher has to be very aware of his/her own prejudices in order to avoid them negatively influencing the study.</td>
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Ethnography lets the researcher gather enough empirical data to find the different ways a technology is used, the different definitions it is given by social actors, the contextual factors that influence this uses and definitions, the social relations that are built around a technology... All this information is a very good starting point to have an open non-determinist perspective on any research project devoted to new media. It reminds us that technologies are social constructions and that social environments should not be out of the picture if we want to understand the shape and the fate of new media.

References


