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EDITORIAL

MEDIA ANTHROPOLOGY: STUDYING THE LIFE OF MEDIA CONSUMERS THROUGH AUDIENCE ETHNOGRAPHY

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The growing popularity of audience ethnography captivates global anthropologists to shift their research interest from traditional culture to popular culture, observing the life of audience around media production. This phenomenon becomes the genesis of media anthropology school of thought which is popular among scholars in both anthropology and media/cultural studies. Conceptually, media anthropology can be defined as an interdisciplinary field which acknowledges mass media consumption and production as an aspect that construct human day-to-day lives and culture (Askew, 2002; Osorio, 2005; Spitulnik, 1993). However, the term "media anthropology" itself has not been widely recognized. Debra Spitulnik (1993) doubts the acceptance of "anthropology of mass media" as a standalone field among anthropologists. Yet, she argues that there exists relations between mass media, society and culture and that is the intersection of anthropology, sociology, and mass media research where the question about the implications of mass media for fundamental social and cultural change becomes central (Spitulnik, 1993: 307). John Postill (2005), an anthropologist who studied the influence of media to national identity of an indigenous society in Malaysia, names "media anthropology" as a mere research area in ethnological studies. Considering the increasing research interest in mass media culture, Francisco Osorio proposes "mass media anthropology" as a scholarly discipline which refers to "the field within anthropology that studies the way in which culture shapes society through the mass media" (Osorio, 2005: 36).

As a branch in anthropology, media anthropology has contributed to the discipline in three areas (Peterson, 2003). First, media anthropologists produce thick ethnographies just like other cultural anthropologists. Second, media anthropology has shifted anthropological work from Europe and North America to global South. Third, the scholars in media anthropology

establish alternative theories through theories of change, social formations, and cultural forms. One prominent characteristic of media anthropology to be considered as a subsection in anthropological field is its use of ethnographical method of research.

Ethnographic approach to audience research has come to existence among the researchers in the field of media and cultural studies since the 1980s (Gray, 2003; Seiter, 2004; Hermes, 2010). The tradition of the anthropology-inspired methodological approach which started in Europe and North America is popular among media anthropologists and reception researchers in non-Western countries. For example, they adopt this approach to study television consumption and identity politics (Abu-Lughod, 1995; Mankekar, 1999; Scrase, 2002; Shetty, 2008), media and nation building (Postill, 2008; Blondheim & Liebes, 2009), and soap opera reception and modernity (Thompson, 2000; La Pastina, 2004; Machado-Borges, 2007).

Ethnography is a qualitative research methodology that requires a researcher to spend a period of time with the community under study, observing and recording their lives in natural settings (Hamersley & Atkinson, 2007; Gobo, 2008; Fetterman, 2010). This methodological mechanism has long been adopted in the study of media audiences. According to Moores (1996: 9), audience ethnography refers to a methodological practice for "investigating the social world of actual audiences, using qualitative techniques—most notably the extended period of participant observation 'in the field' and the unstructured conversational interview with informants". The main objective of audience ethnography is to understand the media consumption "from the virtual standpoint of actual audiences" (Ang, 2005: 136). In addition, it serves as an instrumental purpose for understanding "the media practices, and meanings people attach to media, and as a way to document everyday media practices in detail" (Perala, Helle, & Johnson, 2012: 12).

The anthropological based approach emerged in the early 1980s within the British Cultural Studies (BCS) community (Hermes, 2010). It started with Stuart Hall's "Encoding/Decoding" thesis (1980) which significantly inspired a number of other researchers in the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham and the rest of the world. Some of the notable pioneers in television audience ethnographies include Dorothy Hobson's study of British Soap Opera (1982), Ien Ang's Dutch Dallas study (1985), David Morley's Family Television (1986), Charlotte Brunsdon's study of woman television audience (1986), and Ann Gray's study of feminine Video Cassette Recorder (1987). However, these studies explore the audience's decoding of certain television programs simply through qualitative interviews and textual analysis. The lack of time that media researchers spend in the field is an issue for some anthropologists (Spitulnik, 1993; Gray, 2003; Seiter, 2004). Spitulnik (1993) notes that critics raise the important points missing in ethnography of media audience such as detailed participant observation and actual immersion in audience's life.

Despite these critiques, media audience researchers continue to use the term ethnography to label their study even though the procedures do not necessarily meet the nature of traditional ethnography. For example, Marie Gillespie's study of British Punjabi youth's television culture (1995) and Chris Barker's exploration of soap talks among the British Asian girls (1997) combine participant observation with qualitative surveys and focus group discussion respectively. However, the ethnography of media audience has been expanded to the study of online culture and communities, such as "CMC (Computer-Mediated Communication) ethnography" or "virtual ethnography" (Hine, 2000), "netnography" (Kozinets, 2002; Langer & Becham, 2005) and "network ethnography" (Howard, 2002). These new forms of ethnography allow media researchers to conduct observation of textual discourse that arise from virtual communities' activities, in non-territorial field site.

In point of fact, there are some excellent contemporary media research studies that are conducted in accordance with the proper practices of ethnography. For example, Vicki

Mayer's two-year fieldwork in San Antonio (2003) explores the Mexican American's reception of telenovela through interviews and participant observation that includes field notes and television co- watching. Similarly, Thais Machado-Borges (2007) adds complementary methods such as structured conversation and essays along with the other primary approach to understand Brazilian youth's telenovelas consumption. Another telenovela study that can be considered as proper ethnography is La Pastina's study of audiences in rural Brazil (2004). Through a year-long study in the field, Antonio C. La Pastina (2004) carries out triangulation of in-depth interviews, surveys, focus group discussion, archival readings and participant observation to explore rural Brazilians' engagement in popular telenovelas. Notwithstanding the disciplines, some scholars such as Abu-Lughod (1997), Mankekar (1999), Shetty (2008) and Rofil (2016) apply ethnographic approaches in their television audience research and shed light upon understanding of television audiences and politics of identity.

Essentially, audience ethnography is the salient trend in the second and third generation of media reception research, underlying the studies of the relationships between media, culture and communities (Alasuutari, 1999). While the earlier generation embraces the critical inquiries of identity politics, the contextual use of media and the role of media in everyday life; the latter suggests to "bring the media back to media studies", by which both content and audience interpretation are critically analyzed (Alasuutari, 1999, p. 7). In the beginning, ethnography offers an instrumental mechanism which enables media researchers to "overcome the artificiality of mass communication research based on naturally occurring data" (Ruddock, 2001: 128).

The importance of ethnography as a methodology in media and cultural researches lies in its core principle that acknowledges audiences as active consumers of media texts. David Morley (1992) argues that media audience research needs to be diverted from the "pessimistic mass society thesis" to shifting between "optimistic" and "pessimistic" paradigms. Furthermore, Morley (1992: 50-51) suggests that communication researchers should consider "the dimensions of power and influence through which the powerful (leader and communicators) were connected to the powerless (ordinary people, audiences)". In this way, both content of messages that have effects on audience and the social meanings which audiences produce from the negotiation with the message can be analyzed in symmetrical and simultaneous manners. Likewise, contemporary audience ethnography offers the best of both worlds, encompassing the media-based and audience-based research through which media programs are analyzed and discussed by both audiences and researchers, while experiencing them live in the field.

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