THE JOURNALIST AS ETHNOGRAPHER?

How Anthropology Can Enrich Journalistic Practice

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As this book amply shows, media anthropology can mean many things, from the anthropological analysis of media texts, producers, and audiences to applied efforts to present anthropological concepts effectively in the news media (Allen, 1994; Bruns, 2000).

In this brief chapter, I explore another, related question: What is the relationship between doing anthropology and doing journalism? Can journalists benefit from considering anthropological methods and approaches as they report and write the news? It has long been argued that social science and journalism are markedly different enterprises, based on different knowledge claims. These arguments often draw from Robert Park's (1967) distinction between abstract "knowledge about," through which the social scientist fits facts into theoretical frameworks aimed at predictability, and intuitive "acquaintance with," through which the journalist accumulates facts that then, somehow, speak for themselves.

Phillips (1977) commented some years ago "that the journalist's way of knowledge... personally, professionally, and organizationally—is structured in one direction and the social scientist's is structured in another is an important factor underlying their frequently mutual incomprehension and distrust" (p. 75). However, she also mentions the then-brewing movement in social science toward interpretive approaches, which she describes as beginning to "blur the traditional social science distinctions between knower and known, research and subject, theory and practice" (p. 75). She concludes that this approach "may later come to bridge the seemingly unresolvable distance between social scientific and journalistic notions of objectivity" (p. 75).

Indeed, as we look at the relationship between social scientific and journalistic approaches a quarter century later, we see significant "blurring" between the two, although it is clear that journalistic accounts are still "suspect in academic circles" (Shankman, 2001, p. 49). In cultural anthropology, descriptive and interpretive approaches have always been at the core, epitomized in the ethnographic method, and there has long been debate within the discipline about whether ethnography is a science, an art, or perhaps a bit of both. These days, there is a growing recognition among anthropologists that ethnographic methods,
developed to holistically study isolated societies, must be adapted to the realities of a globally interconnected world, with ethnographers developing many new techniques (which often resemble journalistic methods) and applying them in familiar societies (see, e.g., Abu-Lughod, 2000; Marcus, 1998). Wolcott (1999) argues that, although ethnography is not in itself a clearly defined "method," a "central and uniting" principle of all ethnographic work is "a commitment to cultural interpretation" (p. 76).

It would seem that the same commitment is behind the last few decades' surge of interest in forms of journalism that go beyond traditional event-oriented reporting. For instance, the "cultural journalism" movement, inspired by such grassroots initiatives as the Foxfire project, "focuses on . . . everyday experiences and traditions in a community, as described by its residents, more than on the extraordinary . . . described by reporters as news" (Olmstead, 1986, p. 6). The academic home of the movement is the Salt Center for Field Studies, affiliated with the University of Maine, where students from many disciplines, including journalism, anthropology, sociology, and history, gain experience and training in what amount to ethnographic and documentary techniques aimed at capturing everyday experience. There is also "new journalism," which, as Shroder (1994) writes, rather more flamboyantly "penetrated the logic and customs of an exotic group and comprehended the world in the group's own terms" (p. 63), an enterprise that sounds much like ethnography. Such exercises in cultural reporting are often best suited to magazines, but many newspapers have also showcased extended, richly detailed feature stories with no traditional "news angle." Indeed, some believe this is one way to counter increased competition from broadcast news, as these kinds of stories can be done so much more effectively in print.

Thus there are certain genres of journalism that have already consciously developed an ethnographic stance, with an interpretive, rather than factual, goal. In this chapter, however, my aim is to discuss the relevance of the anthropological approach to journalism in a more general sense—how some acquaintance with (or even knowledge about) ethnographic approaches might help general reporters. Drawing on my own background as both journalist and anthropologist, as well as my experience in teaching journalistic writing and anthropological methods classes, I suggest ways in which an appreciation of anthropological ways of knowing might help young journalists become more effective and perceptive in their future careers.

**Anthropological Perspectives and Journalists**

An anthropological perspective necessitates a particular relationship between researcher and "subject." Interviewing is obviously as important in anthropology as in journalism, but the stance of the ethnographer tends to be different from either social science or traditional news interviews, hinging on the difference between viewing the interviewee as source and research subject and as informant.

To a journalist, the "source" is exactly that—a source of information that is, in a way, separate from the personality of the individual. Similarly, sociologists traditionally treated the subject as a repository of information that could be tapped, the information becoming objectifiable and quantifiable. Although journalism textbooks now regularly discuss "social science" approaches to sources and data, stressing the importance of valid surveys, quantifiable information, and so on, they rarely explore the more time-consuming and humanistic approach to sources that characterizes ethnography.

Unlike the traditional sociologist, the anthropologist is less wary of the dangers of "subjectivity" and, in fact, aims and expects to relate to the informant as an individual. Anthropologists rarely interview an informant only once; a first interview is usually a preparatory, "getting-to-know-you" session, in which the interviewer will be less concerned with extracting facts and more concerned with reaching an understanding of the person and her or his particular concerns.
Furthermore, interviews may follow (or be embedded in) varying periods of observation and familiarization with the social scene. The questions to be asked in subsequent interviews should emerge as much from the impressions gathered from that first interview as from preconceived scientific hypotheses. Later interviews will probe more deeply but should all be in the context of mutual cooperation rather than one-way information flow, and these interviews will be enriched by the other interviews and informal observation that are necessary components of the anthropologist's method. For many anthropologists, the ideal interview is akin to a conversation (Camitta, 1990), and whatever the specific context (face-to-face, telephone, virtual, and so on), the goal is to see the world from the informant's point of view (Bird, 2003).

How is this relevant to a busy journalist working on deadline or to a harried journalism student trying to turn out a story assignment? The magazine writer or “cultural journalist” may have the luxury to spend the same amount of time on fieldwork that an anthropologist might, but what about general assignment journalists or beat reporters? I believe such journalists can practice seeing things ethnographically, even within the confines of the daily news regime. For instance, they might attempt to develop empathy with sources—communicating with them rather than interrogating them. To a journalist, the source is too often seen as a “representative,” a unit that speaks for other like units, rather than as an individual. At the same time, although anthropologists encourage interaction with informants as individuals, their holistic approach encourages a perception of connections between individuals; this perception would be valuable in making journalists see the relationships between their sources and the wider cultural context.

Too often, journalists see each interview as an entity that bears little relationship either to previous interviews with the same person or to other interviews and observations related to the particular story. The tendency to use the telephone from the isolation of the newsroom may have something to do with that. The broader, more cultural approach fostered by anthropology encourages the appreciation of patterns and connections and should help to break down the compartmental approach of journalism, which treats every story, every source as unique and new.

The anthropological approach could be especially useful for beat reporters, who must develop a sense of continuity and connectedness in meaning. It is obviously important for a beat reporter to continue working with sources over time and to develop a sense of broader patterns—stories that lead to other stories and so on. Beat reporters could learn from anthropologists the relevance of keeping a complete “field diary” of their interaction with sources and happenings on the beat (see Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). Once again, we see the difference between reporting discrete events or interviews aimed at particular stories and keeping a record of the whole “web of significance”—the beat, or the field, that allows the journalist-anthropologist to draw informed, broader conclusions about what is really happening. For instance, Shroder (1994) describes covering student government politics as a journalism-anthropology student, using his anthropological training to see beyond the story on election-brokering he was assigned.

Instead of focusing on the scandal . . . we were interested in how the participants in the system perceived their roles, how they maintained their public morality or realigned it, and how the in-groups viewed the rest of the campus community . . . . [The result was] a different kind of story from what would have been written by a traditional journalist . . . [making it clear that] the election brokering continued to exist because it fulfilled an important function in a community. (p. 63)

The journalist habitually sets out on an interview with a particular story in mind, armed with some previous knowledge of the beat, and perhaps the evidence of stories written before and retrieved from the morgue. Still, each story is approached as separate, “irrelevant” notes may be discarded or never made in the first place, and only “timely” questions are asked. One wonders how much richer and multifaceted beat coverage might be if it could draw on notes made over
time, observations jotted down that, although not relevant at the time, could suddenly throw light on later developments.

Certainly there are real time constraints, and the journalist may not have the leisure to produce the volume of notes that an anthropologist can, but it is not so much time as a difference in perception that prevents the average journalist from seeing the value of such an approach. Even in introductory newswriting classes, I have found it rewarding to work on this holistic approach to students' chosen beats or interest areas, and some students have been able to produce series of stories that demonstrate a growing awareness of connections and context. Similarly, the development of an appreciation of the complex cultural context of an interview may help journalists—general assignment or beat—in framing their questions and recording answers more effectively. Too often, journalists and their editors "know" what the story will be before they even start work—they may even have leads running around in their heads. It becomes an easy task to prove that this story is indeed the right one by asking the right sources the right questions and managing to ignore other issues that may come up in the course of the interview or the event. It is not deliberate bias or distortion, but it is an inevitable byproduct of the particularistic, event-oriented perception of the journalist.

Furthermore, as more and more research shows, what "the story" is depends a great deal on the conventions of information gathering, as well as on the conventions of narrative (Bird & Dardenne, 1988). As reporters, we think we have the story when we have spoken to a selection of acknowledged authorities and possibly one or two token symbols of the people. The ethnographer also uses authority figures, and indeed some have been criticized for lazily relying on very few key informants. Ideally, however, the anthropologist never assumes the story is complete; more people must be interviewed as the understanding from previous interviews accumulates, one line of questioning leads to another, and we return to a previous informant who then tells us more. The anthropologist's field is everyday life, and any member of the culture is a valuable source of understanding. The journalist's field is too often the network of officialdom, whether the White House or the local school board. A reporter with anthropological training should never again find it possible to perceive that network and its never-varying and limiting range of potential questions as sufficient. The anthropological perspective demands constant reframing of questions, revision of ideas, and cultivation of new sources; the ethnographic process is dialectical rather than linear, as fieldworkers study their data, discerning patterns and principles that then have to be followed up with further interviews and observation (Agar, 1996). This curiosity and unwillingness to settle for easy questions, easy answers, easily obtained, would be something that any journalism student might well learn to develop—even under the kind of time constraints that anthropologists have the luxury of escaping.

WRITING THE STORY

Journalists could learn not only to rethink their approaches to gathering information but also to writing and analyzing it. Although anthropology shares with journalism an orientation that is more "acquaintance with" than other social sciences, it also involves a more rigorous element of "knowledge about" than journalism displays. Facts do not speak for themselves, yet journalists abdicate responsibility by displaying them as if they do. When journalists have to draw fact together, they frequently rely on known narrative conventions to make sense of the information rather than on theories or patterns that seem to emerge from the accumulation of data, as anthropologists would. This difference stems not only from time constraints but from an explicit difference in purpose: The journalist ostensibly seeks to inform and be "fair," and the anthropologist seeks to interpret. As Lett (1994) observes, "anthropologists and journalists have distinctly different notions about the nature of 'objectivity.' For anthropologists, objectivity means being fair the truth; for journalists, objectivity mea
being fair to everyone involved” (pp. 102-103). Lett, an anthropologist and TV journalist, describes his discomfort at being ordered to “ignore the truth of the matter in hand in the interests of being ‘fair’ to the people involved... e.g. to report that evolution is ‘just a theory’ as a means of being fair to creationists” (p. 102). The richness and complexity offered by anthropological perspective can be a valuable corrective to the simplistic journalistic notion of “balance”—that the story is complete when one has spoken to a designated spokesperson from “each side” of an issue. However, it also demands that the researcher explicitly draw conclusions, and this, of course, is where journalists are often most uncomfortable.

Problematic Issues

Once a journalist or student has been exposed to the complexity of information that anthropological fieldwork methods obtain, it should not be so easy to write news stories that are as one dimensional and conventional as so many now are. An anthropologically trained journalist would virtually by definition have to be an interpretive journalist. That in itself poses a problem for traditional journalism, because interpretation and analysis are supposed to be anathema to unbiased news reporting (unless clearly labeled as such). Culturally oriented journalism is controversial not only among journalists themselves but also to audiences; some readers or viewers react favorably to rich journalism that does not fit the “objective” mold, but many others do not. Probably as many readers or viewers believe in the commonsense paradigm of news as “just the facts,” no matter how frayied that paradigm has become among scholars. A recent and typical case in point was the reaction to an ambitious series of stories in the St. Petersburg Times, one of the few newspapers whose freedom from corporate chain ownership occasionally allows reporters to indulge in extended cultural reporting. The series, 13, was a six-part exploration, totaling more than 40,000 words, that chronicled the lives of seventh graders in Tampa and was based on several weeks of essentially ethnographic fieldwork with the teenagers (French, Fields, & Nguyen, 2003). It had no “news value” in the conventional sense, it certainly was not “objective,” but it effectively conveyed the sense of the world through 13-year-old eyes. Many readers responded with enthusiastic letters to the editor. The series “made me feel the unfortunate reality of the transformation of child to adult”; it was “well written, truthful”; it “opened a door onto a world few ever see or remember, and you have given it due justice, explanation, sympathy and beauty.” It was “outstanding... the writing team captured the essence of the age of innocence with a humorous and sympathetic ‘adult’ understanding” (Letters to the Editor, 2003, p. 13A). Others were less enthusiastic, disliking the subjectivity, the detail, and the lack of “real news” appeal: “My family... is astounded, disgusted and outraged... blatantly attempting to tear down their morals and defy, harass and ridicule parents”; it was “major overkill that could have been covered in one or two articles”; and it was a “silly series” (Letters to the Editor, 2003, p. 13A).

The lesson is that when journalists become more like anthropologists, they also shed the protective cloak offered by news values and objectivity and open themselves to the same criticisms anthropologists have long faced: subjectivity, overidentification with informants, personal bias, and so on. These criticisms have formed the basis for the periodic “scandals” in anthropology about accuracy, such as the dispute over whether Margaret Mead or Derek Freeman was “right” about Samoan culture (Shankman, 2001) and whether Napoleon Chagnon’s accounts of the Yanomami were inaccurate, demeaning, and damaging to them (Tierney, 2000).

Ethnography by its very nature requires greater empathy and involvement with sources than is usual for journalism, and this may seem threatening, unsettling, or just plain hard work. At a practical level, the relationship of source to journalist is usually fairly clearly understood: The source offers information, perhaps in return for publicity. Journalists do develop relationships with their sources, maybe even socializing with them, but one of the acknowledged and very
The potential for involvement in anthropology is probably even greater, given the encouragement to develop relationships that are more long-standing, more intense, and based on more probing, personal questions. Anthropologists are always wary of the dangers of “going native” and becoming an advocate for the culture of “their” people; nevertheless, they continue to do it. In fact, there is a constant and probably unresolvable tension in anthropology between the need to become assimilated and the need to remain the “professional stranger” (Agar, 1996). The tension is neatly illustrated by the comparison between the disparaging term, going native and the much-quoted instruction from Clifford Geertz (1983) to see culture “from the native’s point of view,” a goal he later modified (Geertz, 1988). Anthropologists worry about this issue, fearing it will interfere with their professional credibility. Journalists, however, may have even more to worry about, because they have the added burden of the public’s “right to know.” Often the public would be better informed if the reporter had used the broader, more contextual approaches of anthropology, but there will surely be times when the journalist must be adversary, not ally. The intimacy of the anthropological approach could blind reporters to the necessity of offering unflattering exposes rather than empathetic stories.

At the same time, the empathetic approach may in the end be more effective than the confrontational approach in reaching a deeper understanding, and professional journalists may be guilty of fostering the idea that only adversarial, 60 Minutes–style reporting is really effective in discovering the “truth.” I have certainly been struck by the pervasiveness of this attitude among journalism students, eager as they are to rush out into the “real world” and expose evil. Many seem reluctant to accept the possibility that a deeper understanding could result from building relationships with sources rather than setting out to expose them. In discussing this point in class, I have used my own experience, including one instance in which I had the opportunity to interview a local Ku Klux Klan leader in the mid-1980s. I found the use of a wide-ranging, nonconfrontational approach to be extremely effective in encouraging the source to expand his ideas and even to seek me out for further interviews when he recalled other topics he wished to develop. The final picture that emerged was more complete and informative than would have been painted using an adversarial approach. It was certainly more useful than a quick round-up of phone calls to local official sources asking standard questions about Klan activity.

The problem of overidentification with sources is shared by journalists and anthropologists. Nevertheless, although it is not an easily resolved problem, its existence is not enough of a reason for journalists to reject the deeper understanding that anthropological approaches may offer—when the occasion is appropriate. Anthropologists who criticize journalists’ lack of empathy must, however, also be aware that journalists at times have a responsibility to the public that anthropologists can justifiably avoid.

Related to this issue is another question that has more direct ethical implications. The code of ethics of the American Anthropological Association states unequivocally that anthropologists’ primary responsibilities are to their informants. At all times, their privacy must be safeguarded and respected; specifically ruled out are such techniques as surreptitious recording, misrepresentation, and so on. In recognition of the cooperative role of informants in the creation of an ethnography, many anthropologists are now recommending that informants should be encouraged to read and critique the accounts made of their cultures.

It would be unusual to find a journalist who could share these ethical standards. Although all would surely endorse the need to respect privacy and sources’ rights, would many support the idea that responsibility to a source overrides all other considerations, such as the requirements of a good story or the need to expose an injustice? My own limited study of ethical standards related to surreptitious recordings (Bird, 1985) was similar to
other studies in that it suggested that newspaper editors, who would certainly hold to ethical codes in theory, would break them if a particular story merited it—although none would do so lightly.

One of the great advantages for anthropologists in collecting information is that they are not constrained by the fear of informants that intimate secrets will be published or broadcast. Anthropologists routinely (though less so recently) have given informants anonymity; the general patterns that emerge from their fieldwork are more relevant than the specific identification of one individual. Their copious fieldnotes provide the backup that may be necessary to convince colleagues.

If journalists start to use the more in-depth techniques of anthropologists, they are likely to face more difficult ethical dilemmas. The information they gather may be more intimate and personal, less like the official pronouncements they are used to. There may be more requests for anonymity or even for the right to preapprove stories, which journalists rightly avoid at all costs. The actual gathering of the information is, in any case, likely to be harder when informants know they are talking to journalists, not anthropologists.

However, this may not be such a bad thing. Once journalists become aware of their sources as people, perhaps they will become more critical of the kinds of easy answers that claim the story comes first and that ethics are negotiable. When studying the ways in which ethical dilemmas are faced by ethnographers, journalism students may begin to ask, for instance, if there are other ways information may be obtained before deceptive means must be resorted to. At a more general level, the added perspective seems to help journalists learn to become more self-conscious of what they see as normal, routine ways of interacting with their sources.

CONCLUSION

Notwithstanding the efforts of new journalism or cultural journalism, the rituals and strategies of journalism have become entrenched as so much “common sense.” In this essay, I have offered some thoughts on the contribution that an understanding of anthropological perspectives might bring to the working or student journalist. This contribution might best be summed up as ways in which to nudge journalists out of their comfortable, commonsense routine in which so many conduct their work and challenge them to expand their news-gathering techniques—perhaps even their definitions of what news can be.

The best place to begin this endeavor is in the classroom, where would-be journalists will have more time than ever again to ponder the complexities of how knowledge is gained and how stories are told. At a time when the audience for news is more distracted than ever and newspapers are losing readers (Bird, 2000), we should be aiming to produce graduates who are able to question some of the taken-for-granted certainties of journalistic practice. Journalists are not anthropologists, nor should they be (Grindal & Rhodes, 1987). The two professions have different missions, and they work in different environments and under different constraints. Still, their goals are enough alike that some appreciation of the insights of anthropologists, and perhaps some training in ethnographic methods, could be one fruitful way of expanding the horizons and the richness of journalistic practice.

REFERENCES


