

Divergent Temporalities

On the Division of Labor between Journalism and Anthropology

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Recently, a discussion has been simmering in public and new media anthropology circles as to how we might create more generative ties between anthropology and journalism. Up until now, this discussion has been typically less concerned with how to understand journalism anthropologically (although that is implicitly also what we are doing) and more concerned with how to get more anthropological voices and expertise into news cycles, but commentary in print and digital forums (particularly blogs such as *Savage Minds*) is subtly transforming this conversation.

Our wish for greater publicity is understandable enough; beyond the perennial desire of all specialist communities for wider audiences and impacts, anthropological expertise seems in a particularly unsettled state after decades of self-criticism of our former signature concept, “culture.” Since, after culture, we are no longer quite certain ourselves what constitutes the distinctive center of anthropological knowledge, we feel particularly anxious to know that we have a unique contribution to make to this or that mediated public debate, to feel that our craft of knowledge has relevance and recognition in the world of public/political culture at large.

In this article, I’d like to suggest that to address our concerns about the apparent lack of anthropological knowledge in news media we actually do need to work harder at understanding news journalism anthropologically. More specifically, we have to consider the division of labor between news journalism and anthropological ethnography, which, in my view, share more of a common purpose than either side would generally care to admit but which operate under very different institutional and temporal conditions.

Distant Cousins

Ulf Hannerz, in *Foreign News* (2004), observes that news correspondents “share the condition of being in a transnational contact zone” with anthropologists and are similarly “engaged there in reporting, representing, translating, interpreting—generally, managing meaning across distances, although (in part, at least) with different interests, under different constraints” (see also Bird, 2010, *The Anthropology of News and Journalism*). Much the same could be said of the relationship between news journalism and anthropological ethnography more generally. Although neither is always transnational, both have a minimally *translocal* and *epistemic* orientation as practices of making and communicating knowledge-about-the-world across social and spatial distance. In this respect, news journalism and anthropo-

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logical ethnography are distant cousins, equally storytellers (albeit in different narrative forms and representational registers) and equally social analysts (despite differences in their depths of analytical method and contextual detail). Long-form investigative reporting, for example, seems to share much with the rich tradition of critical, public anthropology. The anthropological field report participates in the tradition of correspondents relaying facts from afar.

And yet, news journalists have been known to dismiss anthro-

pologists as overly obscure, insular and literary in their modes of representation. Likewise, anthropologists have been known to dismiss news journalists as superficial fact-gatherers and spectacle seekers. Above all, we seem to work and think at different speeds, with different senses of investment in the timeliness of facts and in the importance of details.

COMMENTARY

Nevertheless, the real and important differences that exist in our financiers and expected audiences, in the depth of our respective fieldwork and sourcing, in the organizational oversight of our work, and, above all, in the temporal organization of our productivity do not invalidate basic overlaps between journalistic and ethnographic modes of translocal expertise and communication.

Perhaps our current interest in journalism has something to do with our sense that these overlaps may be growing, especially as the contemporary market and labor conditions of professional anthropology pressure us to adopt faster modes of research and writing than ever before. If the traditional rhythm of anthropological knowledge-making involved years of pre-field research, at least one year of field research and then several years of reflection and writing before the publication of a research monograph, it’s hard not to recognize that our contemporary production cycle is shortening.

With shrinking sources for field research funding, both opportunities and expectations for long-term field research (especially after the dissertation project) have diminished. Moreover, fieldwork has become significantly more “multi-sited” (Marcus in *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24), gradually refunctioning the research experience of sociocultural anthropology from longer intervals in fewer places to shorter intervals in more places. At the same time, we face rising expectations for publication, especially in preparation for the job market and tenure review. Even doctoral candidates report feeling

enormous pressure to publish their research findings well in advance of receiving their PhDs. Not unlike the desk journalists of old, we find ourselves increasingly concerned with “getting the story” (Peterson in *Anthropological Quarterly* 74[4]), that is, with chasing the next publication opportunity to keep up with market expectations and the demands of institutional audit cultures.

Temporal Intensity

The transition to digital information and communication technology since the 1980s has affected

both journalism and anthropology in profound ways, creating new temporal efficiencies but also new temporal intensities in both professional worlds. Thinking of the impact of email alone, anthropological communication is surely more fast-moving than in past generations. But news journalism is a faster and more obviously multi-mediated practice still.

During field research in 2008 at the Associated Press office in Frankfurt, I observed assistant managing editors (or “slotter” in local parlance) juggle, among other things, tracking several real-time newsfeeds across three computer monitors; constantly checking the Internet portals of clients and competitors; fielding queries from story writers and phone calls from correspondents; coordinating assignments and editing by instant message; and watching the fax machine, telex and several television monitors tuned to news broadcasters. All in all, I tracked slotter processing several thousand potential news items a day at an average of 97 different discrete activities every hour, meaning a change in focus or medium roughly every 37 seconds.

Although news agency slotting is admittedly one of the most intense activities within news journalism, it is not exceptional in its focus on the constant circulation and evaluation of facts from afar. Professional anthropology may be just as committed to translocal epistemic work, but even on its most harried days it remains free of the unrelenting flow of a just-in-time production model in which

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New Delhi and to other Indian metropolitan areas.

Like ethnography, reporting is inefficient. Dozens of pages of interviews, notes and background materials will be boiled down to a single 500-word story. Ethnographers may accumulate enough field notes, interviews and other materials to fill boxes, yet they will write only a few articles and perhaps a book.

Finally, for anthropologists unhappy with the word “fiction,” the trope of journalism recognizes a distinction between the practice of reporting (getting and assembling facts, interviews and background materials) and writing (preparing a structured narrative account of the people and events to which these materials refer). Extending this distinction allows anthropologists to restore the empiricism of the practice of ethnography while acknowledging the constructed nature of the ethnography as a written document.

Since Geertz’s introduction of “fiction” as a trope for ethnography, and his call to attend to the fact that whatever else they may be anthropologists are writers, a good deal of anthropological writing has become more engaging. Foregrounding thick description of people, their artifacts and their dialogue, this writing is often much like the “New Journalism” of the 1960s and ’70s or the “enterprise reporting” of the 1980s and ’90s.

I find comparisons between journalism and ethnography to be particularly useful in undergraduate teaching, where many students find themselves struggling to overcome the absolute separation of fact and fiction drilled into them as part of their junior high school curriculum. Indeed, problematizing the notions of fact and fiction, and of objectivity and bias, are important lessons students can carry with them far beyond the anthropology classroom.

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Engagement

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issues such as poverty, health disparities, education, migration, disasters and more, in our home countries and elsewhere. All these issues are defined by media; news shapes reality into acceptable stories that foreground some concerns and dismiss others. It’s very clear, for instance, that news stories tend to present issues as stories about individual experiences, rather than about systematic failures. How the public responds to key social issues is intimately connected to how they learn about them through the media. Yet although it is quite common for anthropologists to rather unproblematically use newspaper archives to trace local events and histories, it is much less common for them to do careful media content analysis to develop a picture of how issues are framed for the public. The inclusion of media content analysis in multi-sited ethnographies grows ever more crucial.

Anthropologists came late to the field of media studies, and even later to the study of news and journalism, but we still have an opportunity to pursue serious engagement today. Like ethnography, journalism creates narratives about reality; others in this commentary series address the complicated ways in which the two endeavors are both alike and different. Journalists must write at a speed most of us would find terrifying, and by necessity they draw on familiar formulae and established conventions, such as emphasis on conflict, timeliness and the out-of-ordinary. If we understand better how journalism works, not only will we better understand our mediated global cultures, but we will also become more adept at working with journalists to tell anthropology’s stories more effectively.

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decisions about the relevance and expression of information are made within seconds. News journalists would be the first to tell us: news journalism has become informationally overloaded and treadmill-like in the digital era and thus often relatively inattentive to forms of knowledge circulating outside its core conduits.

Anthropological ethnography, like a great many other potential sources for journalistic representation, exists on the margins of the journalistic imagination today not because its virtues are unappreciated, but because it is felt to be too detailed and context-sensitive to operate efficiently within contemporary news cycles. This is a loss for news media and public culture, we are right to feel, but I don’t think we should view this as a sign of the irrelevance of anthropological knowledge. Put another way, why not be happy that a craft of slow-time translocal epistemic work continues to exist, indeed to thrive, next to the fast-time circuits of news journalism? If what makes the analytical and representational methods of our craft distinctive is precisely that they do not conform to the temporality and bare-facts-

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to understand how news is actually produced. “Media” is often a conflated reference to fictional representation through films, broadcast entertainment and advertising, rarely specific to the craft of news gathering and reporting. Journalism is different from other forms of cultural production, and content analyses of newspapers and magazines can’t get at an individual reporter’s intentions and goals. Barry Dornfeld’s *Producing Public Television* (1998) is among the rare book-length, participant-observation-based efforts to treat the production of popular non-fiction.

Until recently, journalism has been largely ignored by anthropological researchers—a missed

orientation of most journalism, then we could actually see our apparent irrelevance to news media as a sign that we are doing what we do well.

I’m not suggesting that we shouldn’t continue to explore new ways of engaging news journalism and to experiment with fast-time communication across a variety of old and new media. But I don’t think we should convince ourselves that these experiments will radically improve the public visibility of anthropology or that they will quiet our inner doubts about what makes the anthropological voice a distinctive presence in the choir of public debate. As for our current relationship with news journalism, I think it is a productive division of labor, one in which the informational overload, sound-bites and fast-time intensity of contemporary news media make the kind of detail-oriented slow-time work we do all the more vital.

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opportunity. The journalist’s scramble to observe people firsthand and to describe both ordinary and extraordinary events in ways that illuminate larger issues is the closest of any mainstream media endeavor to ethnographic practice. A more nuanced awareness of potential points of contact can lead to more powerful ethnographic writing, more informative journalism, and productive collaborations between social scientists and others who seek to describe the human condition.

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