



# Ethnographic journalism

Journalism

2016, Vol. 17(2) 260–278

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DOI: 10.1177/1464884914555964

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## Abstract

Accounting for emerging journalistic genres is a difficult endeavor not least because there is little agreement as to what constitutes journalism itself. Doing so, however, is essential if we are to recognize changing journalistic doxas. To capture such changes, we must include a holistic framework that takes into account the position, commitment, role, writing and language of journalists as well as the scope, temporality, narrative and reproductive labor of texts. This article introduces such a framework. At a moment in time when multiculturalism poses evident challenges to the press and media trends require more contextual reporting, *ethnographic journalism* emerges in American feature journalism. Analyzed holistically, this genre is characterized as the employment of immersion strategies adopted from social science for distinct storytelling purposes. These methods, however, transform conventional journalistic epistemology, changing it through practice. In turn, the analysis reveals how journalism practices can evolve its troubled philosophical position.

## Keywords

Anthropology, ethnographic journalism, ethnography, genres, immersion journalism, journalism practices, sociology

‘[I]n some respects, sociology’s most powerful competition comes from journalistic ethnographers, notably book writers, who may not have ever taken a sociology course but are trained or self-trained in fieldwork and intensive interviewing’.

(Gans, 2010: 100)

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The relationship between ethnographers and journalists is often a site of mutual suspicion. Journalism's predominantly positivist paradigm fuels the contempt of postmodern social scientists. Conversely, journalists frown upon the inert jargon of much academic writing and its inability to assert relevance. Yet, the inherent overlaps of journalism and ethnography escape few scholars conducting newsroom studies or using other ethnographically informed methods. Moreover, ethnography has emerged as an explicitly accentuated ideal for reporters in the United States who attempt to portray human environments from within. Especially, long-form literary reporting and public ethnography seem inherently related (Boyer, 2010: 6; Sefcovic, 1995).

This kinship is not new. As a former journalist, American sociologist Robert Park drew heavily on journalistic practices as he propelled qualitative research within the social sciences by transforming the University of Chicago into a pioneer center for participant-observer-based fieldwork at the turn of the last century (Iorio, 2004: 7; Lindner, 1990 [1996]). And as early as the 1880s, Nellie Bly, a reporter at Joseph Pulitzer's *The New York World*, simulated insanity to study a mental institution from within. Her articles and subsequent book, *Ten Days in a Mad-House*, might be the earliest example for journalistic ethnography. The tradition continued with works like George Orwell's 1933 immersion into poverty, *Down and Out in Paris and London*, John Hersey's 1946 series for *The New Yorker*, and subsequent book *Hiroshima* on the aftermath of the atomic bombing, and Hunter S. Thompson's 1967 combination of 'journalistic sensationalism with an extreme form of ethnographic participant observation' in *Hell's Angels: A Strange and Terrible Saga* (Sefcovic, 1995: 20). These are just a few of the many journalistic works that mastered essentially ethnographic methods.

But only in recent decades have journalists and anthropologists employed 'ethnographic journalism' (Cramer and McDevitt, 2004) and related terms like 'anthro-journalism' (Fillmore, 1987), 'literary documentary journalism' (Harrington, 2003), 'new new journalism' (Boynon, 2005), and 'cultural journalism' (Bird, 1987) to describe a journalism using research methods derived from traditional ethnographic approaches. In other words, while ethnographic journalism itself did not recently emerge, its distinct ethnographic qualities have only recently been appreciated and categorized as such. Empirical work on the genre is still limited, however, and observers tend to engage with it normatively, championing its virtues, rather than descriptively analyzing it. This article not only presents an analysis of ethnographic journalism but also a model for analyzing normative currents of journalistic practices generally. I argue that ethnographic journalism is essentially the use of social scientific immersion strategies, like participant-observation, and the concurrent remodeling of journalism's epistemic makeup. This reveals how journalism is an acquired process of sense making made up of changing philosophical, practical and expressional parts. Furthermore, these practices may be a requisite response to some evident trends in the press, such as the surge in contextual reporting and some of its challenges, for example, mediating the multicultural society.

## Negotiating the boundaries of journalism

'Nothing disables journalists more than thinking that current practice is somehow in the nature of things', wrote James Carey (1997a: 331). But imagining journalism to have a

natural, predetermined essence also disables scholarly analyses. Journalistic diversity is evident from the development of a myriad of genres over the past century challenging traditional journalism on separate levels. Consider how genres like interpretive journalism (MacDougall, 1938) and precision journalism (Meyer, 1973 [2002]) revolted against the epistemic regimes of conventional news by promoting interpretive and analytical rather than objective practices. And how public journalism (Glasser, 1999) and intimate journalism (Harrington, 1997) challenged mainstream reporting strategies by approaching people as participants and focusing on the ordinary, rather than the extraordinary. Additionally, new journalism (Wolfe, 1973) and literary journalism (Sims and Kramer, 1995) violated conventional styles of writing by adopting elements from fiction. Individually, such in(ter)ventions, along with many other genres, challenged and expanded the philosophies, practices, and expressions of journalism. Collectively, they challenge our conception of journalism as a coherent professional ideology based on objectivity, autonomy, public service, immediacy, and ethics (Deuze, 2005).

But while journalism may be read as a curriculum containing many different 'courses' (Carey, 1986: 151), that is, genres, journalism scholarship accounts for just a small part of this contemporary catalog (Zelizer, 2004: 6, 213–214). 'Critical incidents' in journalism can help us decipher conventions of journalistic practice and authority, Zelizer (1992) argues, describing these incidents as 'hot moments' by which people 'air, challenge and negotiate their own boundaries of practice' (p. 67). For journalists, she writes, such incidents include the Watergate scandal, the Kennedy assassination and the Vietnam War. For second-order observers, i.e. journalism scholars, such incidents may include the pronounced emerging of new genres. By using ethnographically informed methods, contemporary journalistic ethnographies such as Ted Conover's *Newjack*, Alex Kotlowich's *There Are No Children Here*, and Anne Fadiman's *The Spirit Catches You And You Fall Down* transgress dominant norms in journalism, allowing other journalists to consider alternatives when making professional choices.

Since journalism is a truth business (Harcup, 2004: 81), its epistemic underpinnings are essential to its practices. To explore how these epistemic assumptions and practices are correlated, we may contemplate the practice of journalism through Bourdieu's (1977: 73) notion 'habitus', described as the regulation of behavior by past conditions and present possibilities of an agent. Habitus causes particular practices, without explicit reason or intent, to be nonetheless 'sensible' and 'reasonable' (Bourdieu, 1977: 79). As such, the practices of journalism are guided by epistemic standpoint as well as strategic sensibilities and expressional possibilities. Thus, in our effort to obtain a holistic understanding of journalism (Deuze, 2005; Skinner et al., 2001), we must examine the relationship between journalistic epistemology and the strategies and styles of the field. By examining these divergent aspirations, we can account for the way in which changing assumptions, routines and narratives produce different notions of the desirable, probable, possible, and impossible (Bourdieu, 1977: 78).

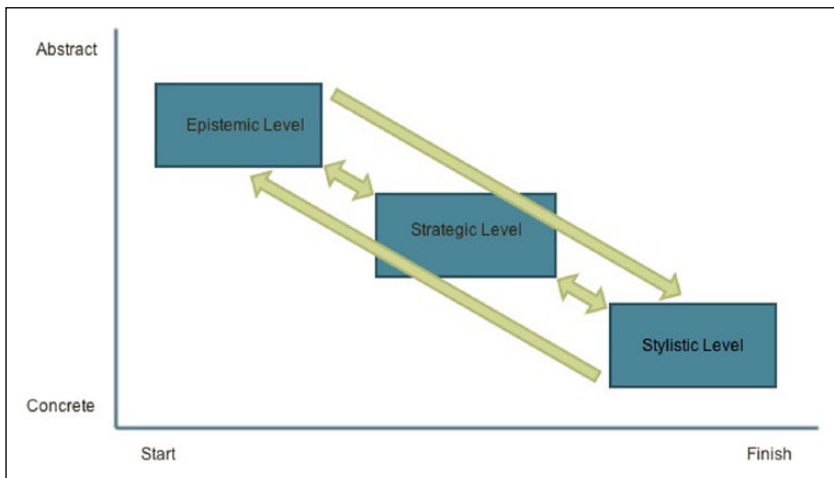
Accordingly, this article analyzes ethnographic journalism as it distends the epistemic boundaries of journalistic craftsmanship, adopts new strategies for reporting and disregards conventional styles of news writing. Journalism, as we know, is a slippery category and providing a clear-cut definition of ethnographic journalism is equally tricky since it bleeds into many neighboring genres. The efforts to arrive at a conceptualization, however, reveal

its central features. In turn, I suggest that ethnographic journalism may respond to the rise of multiculturalism, generally, and context-aware journalism, specifically.

In this analysis, the *epistemic level* is understood as the logics and assumptions upon which journalistic inquiry is based, explicitly or implicitly. Epistemology, understood as the way in which we know, can be seen as a system of *ideas* fundamental to knowledge, justification, experience, evidence and understanding and thus essential to the theorization of any journalism. Precision journalism (Meyer, 1973 [2002]), for instance, exemplifies how the adoption of scientific epistemology, though quite abstract, produced a new kind of journalism.

While the end itself is determined on the epistemic level, the means or *method* for succeeding operates on the *strategic level*. Including its audience as participants, public journalism (Glasser, 1999) exemplifies how new strategic approaches changes journalism.

The *stylistic level* is the most concrete level and relates especially to the *literary style* of the product. But such concerns may inform both the strategic and epistemic levels in addition to being determined by them. New journalism (Wolfe, 1973) exemplifies the impact of literary form on journalistic content.



**Figure 1.** The epistemic, strategic, and stylistic levels of journalistic genres.

Accordingly, these three levels structure the following analysis of ethnographic journalism. This analysis, by necessity, will employ ideal types, in a Weberian sense, of journalism and ethnography (Weber, 1949). These hypothetical idea-constructs are not meant to correspond with any empirical example nor to statistical averages. Instead, these are pure types illuminating common characteristics of conventional practices in each field in order to analyze the space between the two. Throughout, I will include examples from ethnographic journalist Ted Conover's work to consistently illustrate the theoretical contemplations. Using participant-observation as his primary reporting technique since the 1980s, Conover has published numerous books and articles on hoboes, illegal migrants, truck drivers, meat inspectors, prison guards, and other social groups.

## Epistemic level

Starting on the epistemic level, ethnographic journalism challenges at least three aspects of conventional journalism: its objectivity ideal, its preoccupation with singular events, and its cultural values.

## Objectivity dismissed

Conventional journalism relies upon commonsense positivism, most explicitly in its objectivity ideal. This ideal includes not only ontological objectivity, i.e. the belief that one can accurately account for reality, but also procedural objectivity, that is, hearing ‘both sides’ of a story and eschewing interpretation. Conventional journalism also relies upon epistemological objectivity, believing that an account is true if it rests upon certain types of sources, methods, and evidence – namely facts (Ward, 2009). Conversely, ethnography is a highly interpretive practice in which the researcher searches for meaning rather than facts *per se*. Singer (2009: 192) juxtaposes the descriptive mode of journalism to the ‘aim of ethnographic research’, defined as probing for meaning through contextual ‘thick description’ (Geertz, 1973). As Sefcovic (1995: 21) writes of the difference between journalistic and ethnographic approaches to data collection,

while the journalist is concerned with the who, what, when, where, how, and why of the event, the ethnographer applies these questions to the process of data collection itself, determining who shall be the source, where and when data may be obtained, and even ‘why [the data] ... is needed anyway’.

Additionally, in the wake of Michel Foucault’s (1970 [1994]) critique of the relationship between power and knowledge, anthropology took a ‘reflexive turn’ propelled by the so-called Writing Culture-movement (Clifford and Marcus, 1986). This signified a growing awareness of the risk of objectifying of peoples and cultures and imposing one’s own frame of reference onto the lived experiences of others.

In other words, combining ethnography and journalism involves significant epistemological challenges concerning the objectivity norm of mainstream journalism (Bird, 2005; Cramer and McDevitt, 2004: 137; Singer, 2009). Bird (2005) defines ‘an ethnographic stance in journalism’ as having an interpretive, rather than factual, goal, reminiscent of interpretive journalism, while Cramer and McDevitt (2004: 130) argue that ethnographic journalists must exchange objectivity with ‘standpoint epistemology’. Ethnographic journalists must examine the ‘inner truths’ of group through immersion by which the members of the group in question are the ultimate authorities regarding the significance of events (Cramer and McDevitt, 2004: 128–130). Harrington (2003: 92), too, holds that the ‘journalistic anthropologist’ includes a search for meaning. Consequently, ethnographic journalism resembles genres like Tom Wolfe’s new journalism in its attempt at penetrating the logics of ‘exotic groups’ and comprehending the world on their terms (Bird, 2005: 302–303). Concluding that ethnography offers a means for journalists to recover essential but neglected principles of their craft, Cramer and McDevitt (2004: 141) link this epistemic end to the Commission of the Freedom of the Press’ (1947) call for the press to project ‘a representative picture of the constituent groups in the society’ (p. 102).

This is evident in Conover's reflections on his work. Describing his identity as a 'rubber band' that expands to incorporate the role he takes on in a given community, Conover rejects the idea of objectivity. In fact, he considers the acknowledgement of his own predispositions, or 'bias' as he puts it, a source of 'empowerment' since it is a vehicle for penetrating the logics of the communities he studies. This resembles the anthropological trope of utilizing the ethnographer's foreignness to a community in order to expose and question the taken-for-granted. As Conover (2014) explained in one of my interviews with him,

In this day and age, the job is to acknowledge your bias and understand it and know that it's a limitation as well as an empowerment. I often think the measure of my success will be how much I can accept and appreciate someone else's point of view and allow it to coexist with my own.

Reporting from the margins, Conover negotiates traditional objectivity, which tends to reproduce dominant paradigms (Carey, 1997b: 139), with, in his own words, 'fairness'.

### **From event to entirety**

However, the epistemology of an ethnographic journalism involves not just a departure from objectivity but also attention to entireties. Mainstream journalism's focus on singular events over substantial social structures is another fundamental epistemological difference between journalism and social science (Bird, 2005; Cramer and McDevitt, 2004; Iorio, 2004; Grindal and Rhodes, 1987). Hannerz (2004) describes a certain division of labor between ethnographers and journalists whereby the latter, witnessing and formulating current events, sketch 'the first draft of history' (pp. 214–215). The event- and fact-driven mode of most journalism is correlated with the strategic and stylistic employment of 'angles' in journalism. This creates a tendency to probe for preconceived aspects in contrast to ethnography's aim at contextualized, holistic interpretations (Bird, 2005; Grindal and Rhodes, 1987; Singer, 2009). Working with angles has essential epistemological implications:

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 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. (Bird, 2005: 304)

This relates to the commoditized nature of journalism. Angles or 'story lines' organize attention and contextualize research by reproducing preconceptions of the news consumer (Hannerz, 2004: 217). As such, commonsense is a reference point that is reproduced, not a phenomenon to be questioned, opposite ethnography. According to Cramer and McDevitt (2004), '[t]his deductive approach – in which interviews are conducted to confirm the story initially imagined by the reporter – is not compatible with the inductive techniques of ethnography' (p. 136). Moreover, orientation toward events signifies important differences in the commitments of the conventional and the ethnographic reporter. Hannerz (2004: 223) holds that, due to their preoccupation with events, reporters, opposite

ethnographers, tend to miss the developments that are the basic factors of change. While standard journalism probes extraordinary events – like conflicts – ethnography encircles quotidian life (Cramer and McDevitt, 2004: 135; Singer, 2009: 194). Conover's (2000 [2001]) book *Newjack* exemplifies how the everyday experiences of a corrections officer hold exciting stories that balance descriptions of the ordinary with journalistic sensationalism:

Perlstein [a superior prison guard] gave me a lighter and sent me down to the north-facing gallery by myself, with instructions to light inmates' cigarettes [...] This was unexpectedly frightening. All I knew about Box inmates [prisoners in solitary confinement] was that they were very, very bad. I thought of agent Clarice Starling approaching Hannibal Lecter's cell in *The Silence of the Lambs*. Downstairs at the Box was the lowest level of hell. (p. 128)

## Cultural reproduction

In a different epistemic register, journalism tends to rest upon, and indeed reproduce, 'cultural values' and 'institutional memories' instated in the archives by professional predecessors (Hannerz, 2004: 217; Singer, 2009: 193). In popular journalism, common-sense constitutes a reference point rather than an ethos to be examined. Such epistemic entrapment makes the press inattentive to forms of knowledge circulating outside its core channels, reinforcing the concerns and prejudices of the average audience (Boyer, 2010: 9; Grindal and Rhodes, 1987: 13). Whereas journalism's emphasis on balance enforces dominant ideologies by defining the limits of acceptable public discourse, 'responsible reporting', or reporting 'at the grass roots', represents marginalized groups and recognizes divergent values in attempt to counter commonplace assumptions (Cramer and McDevitt, 2004: 130; Harrington, 2003: 92). Conover (2014) attempts to avoid the received wisdoms of public discourse:

There can be disadvantages to doing too much research ahead of time. The main disadvantage, I think, is that you uncritically absorb a standard approach to something, which amounts to a set of blinders, which keeps you from considering other interpretations that you might develop based purely on your own experience. So there's some kind of tension there between ignorance and inculcation in a common wisdom or set of approaches. You don't want to be at either pole of that scale. You need to find a comfort zone in the middle.

Finding this middle of the scale, however, seems to constitute the balancing of, on one hand, overriding commonsense with, on the other hand, the journalistic concern for originality. According to Conover (2014), it is of utmost importance to be aware of accounts that may resemble his work: 'If Truman Capote [acclaimed author of the 1966 non-fiction crime story *In Cold Blood*] worked as a prison guard, I've better have read his article'. We see this same normative negotiation in Harrington's (2003) contemplation of what it means to add a prefix like 'ethnography' to journalism:

When you add the word literary to journalism or documentary or ethnography, you cross a line. You are no longer attempting to only describe other people's experiences. You are now taking responsibility for describing them through your own sense of those other people's experiences.

The egoist in us emerges because we now take pride in the way we tell a story, in the cleverness of our inquiry, the uniqueness of our insight. (pp. 102–103)

Evidently, Harrington links this epistemic responsibility with artistic originality, that is, commercial value. However, his distinction between conventional and ethnographic journalistic descriptions resembles the distinctions between first- and second-order observations in social sciences. Ethnography and journalism share the problem of representation concerning accounts of events and people, which are ultimately outsiders' interpretations. Ethnographic journalism provides diversity in journalistic values by abandoning routine reliance on official sources and ideological elites (Cramer and McDevitt, 2004: 131–132). Yet, in anthropology, the 'crisis of representation' concerns not so much cultural bias in the choice of interlocutors but, more importantly, taking control of interlocutors' experiences in autonomous accounts conditioned by the ethnographer's interpretive instruments. Arguably, the 'reflexive turn' in anthropology sought to make up for the fact that ethnographers cannot truly account for the 'native's point of view' but at best provide second-order observation permeated by their own position. Harrington (2003) describes the 'hard challenges' for journalism of 'knowing what people mean when they say things, knowing what their gestures and expressions mean, knowing what the objects they have arrayed around them in their homes mean to them' (p. 92). This implies that the journalist must speak on behalf of interlocutors from a vantage point, which contradicts the precautious approach to textual authority in contemporary anthropology. Nevertheless, a move toward ethnographic accounts modifies the press' reproduction of 'cultural values' by dodging 'inculcation in a common wisdom'. Consequently, such a move changes journalism's concurrent transformation and continuation of the world, that is, its *poïesis*.

## Strategic level

In dialog with the epistemic register of reporters are their practical performances, that is, the methods they employ to serve perceived professional purposes. Just as journalism's ideals guide its reporting processes, its 'reals' impact its ideology: strategic choices or sensibilities during reporting delineate and direct the attention as outlined above.

## Out of angle

This is evident from the limited scope of most journalistic accounts. Although ethnographic fieldwork and journalistic reporting are based on similar techniques of being present and interviewing people, the ethnographic approach is essentially open-ended. Conversely, as mentioned, journalists operate with 'angles' for focusing research and structuring narratives (Bird, 2005; Cramer and McDevitt, 2004; Hannerz, 2004). In addition to the epistemological implications of such a priori determined attention, this produces a linear rather than a dialectical relationship between data and analysis (Bird, 2005: 304, 204). Journalists like Conover and Harrington, however, seemingly negotiate such concerns strategically. While operating with ethnographically informed immersion strategies, they pay attention to 'theme', 'story', and 'angle'. Harrington (2003: 92–94) offers nine defining characteristics, according to which 'journalistic anthropologists' (1)



immerse themselves in the life of their subjects, (2) let action unfold naturally, (3) collect material through all their senses, (4) interview for deeper meaning, (5) watch for a ‘contemporary action line’ that will make the story dramatically coherent, (6) collect overheard dialog, (7) report for telling status details, (8) note gestures and bodily features to render the subject physically, and (9) watch for small events and details that evoke their stories’ themes.

Consequently, specific ethnographic data (details, gestures, small events, bodily features) are extracted purposefully to ‘evoke’ the theme of the (a priori envisioned) story rather than data *deciding* the story in the first place. This underscores Bird’s point that journalists tend to ‘know’ the story prior to research. Conover (2014) exhibits the tension between inductive research and project management:

As much as possible, I try to avoid being on a fishing expedition. In my book about roads [*The Routes of Man*, 2010], I wanted to write about the West Bank. I didn’t just check into a hotel in Jerusalem and begin my research – that could take a very long time. I tried to find situations to investigate before I landed so when I did get to Jerusalem I already knew some Palestinian students who said they’d show me around and I already established that the Israeli military would let me spend time on a base. New things then appeared once I’d established that groundwork.

On one hand, Conover expresses the ‘challenge’ of non-fiction: the inability to control events. On the other hand, we see how some practical concerns of journalism – like time – demand some level of predetermination. This relates to the ‘straightjacketing’ effects that time has on journalism as identified by Schudson (1986: 104). But evidently, the straightjacket is much looser in Conover’s reporting compared to conventional news. What does, however, seem to set some a priori limits is his reporting technique. In other words, the use of ethnographic methods is a motor for his choice of topic. Telling me about his recent reporting for *Harper’s* where he worked as federal meat inspector, Conover (2014) explained how the likelihood of a good outcome increases if he can participate in the phenomenon he studies:

Obviously, in addition, there’s a series of things I’m going to be alert to, themes I would like to examine, like the production of food or the treatment of animals, questions of purity and worker health and all those things. But the big piece is the opportunity to participate because that has the promise of a glimpse behind the curtain and, I hope, an exciting engagement with the narrator as he is faced with difficulty.

This approach to ethnographic reportage exhibits a balancing of conventional journalistic practices with ethnographic considerations by which journalistic norms are recast.

## The role of the researcher

Naturally, the role of a journalist – his or her function, attitude, ethics, and relation to sources – determines the outcome of any reporting. Generally, the antithesis between the objective, event-driven sentiment of journalism and the interpretive, holistic approach of ethnographic inquiry is illuminated by two distinct disciplinary approaches to the field. The use of ethnography in journalism transforms the journalistic interview from an

extraction of specific information into a conception of the ‘lived world’ of interviewees (Cramer and McDevitt, 2004: 136). The attitude to sources is similarly challenged. While the journalist’s primary responsibility is to serve the public, ethnographers’ primary responsibility is to protect informants (Singer, 2009: 192–194). In conventional Western journalism, the observer (journalist) posits a formal distance between himself or herself and the participant (stakeholder/source) in the mediation of information (Singer, 2009). But similar to how *quantitative* methods from social science were a hallmark of precision journalism, the dominant defining character of ethnographic journalism is its adoption of *qualitative* methods, predominantly immersion strategies like participant-observation that blur these lines (Bird, 1987: 5; Boynton, 2005: xv; Cramer and McDevitt, 2004: 127–128; Harrington, 2003: 92; Iorio, 2004: 14–15). According to Boynton (2005: xv), this ‘generation’ of journalists experiments with ways of getting a story by developing immersion strategies and extending the time for reporting: ‘Reporting on the minutiae of the ordinary – often over a period of years – has become their signature method’. The use of immersion strategies in long-term reporting seemingly shares the ethical commitment of the early 20th-century muckrackers like Jacob Riis conjoined with literary gusto (Boynton, 2005: 3).

The function (narrator/partaker), attitude (skeptical/empathic), and loyalty of the researcher (to public/subject) impact the degree of immersion and, hence, the very ability of the researcher to produce the ethnographic insider’s perspective. Consequently, the journalist cannot remain a detached observer and narrator, but must become an immersed partaker. Thus, similar to public journalism, the participatory role inhabited by ethnographic journalists significantly affects the genre’s overall ideology. Moreover, due to the open-ended nature of the inquiry itself, informants cannot be merely ‘token symbols of the people’ illustrating a story that has been determined a priori (Bird, 2005: 304). Ethnographic reporters must transcend ‘not only professional conventions and reporting habits but also their own demographic profiles’ by exchanging the traditional skeptical attitude with an empathetic one (Cramer and McDevitt, 2004).

Such purposeful adoption of what anthropologists call a ‘native point-of-view’, that is, an insider’s perspective, is evident in Conover’s work. For instance, he describes his growing sympathy for the prison guard brutality due to his participatory reporting:

A dozen of us marched purposefully downstairs to the Box. There was action ahead, and I felt suddenly excited to have been included. Despite the ominous tone, and my better instincts, I’d countenanced enough inmate misbehavior and disrespect to feel invigorated by the thought that this is where it all stops. *This is where we draw the line.* (Conover, 2000 [2001]: 131)

In one of my conversations with him, Conover recalled his growing assimilation with Sing Sing prison guards while reporting *Newjack*:

I started saying ‘we’ in about my fourth month of work in the prison. I would say *we did this today, we did that today, we don’t like it when that happens.* I had begun to identify with [corrections officers] as a group even though I’m quite clear that I’m a writer and I take notes everyday on what I’m doing. But I think you can belong to more than one group at a time. (Conover, 2014)

In sum, ethnographic journalists must adjust their role as reporters by immersing themselves as participants in a community to which they are empathetic. This supplants the adversarial norm of mainstream journalism.

### **Omitting immediacy**

Both immersion itself and holistic research take time. Indeed, ethnography is often deliberately slow (Marcus, 2003). On the contrary, relevance, timeliness, and, hence, swiftness are closely linked in journalism (Bird, 2010; Boyer, 2010: 6; Schudson, 1986; Singer, 2009: 193). According to Hannerz (2004: 208), news, generally, is a management of temporality on two separate levels. Due to the urgent fact of deadlines, time impacts the practical mode of production. Second, there is an implied temporality in any journalistic product. These two types of temporality are matters of regimentation and representation, respectively (Hannerz, 2004: 209, 213). Hannerz (2004: 220) argues that, in competing news, urgency trumps the agenda. Thus, attaching a story to an immediate event can heighten its value as a commodity. This corresponds with Schudson's (1986: 80–81, 108) analysis of 'news pegs' and his critique of journalism's 'fetishism of the present'. While Schudson (1986) distinguishes the 'timeliness' of hard news to the 'timelessness' of features, he asserts that '[j]ournalists can do little with what is unchanging, continuous, because they are tied, sometimes straitjacketed, to the conventions of the "news peg"' (p. 104). Observing German journalists, Boyer (2005: 255) similarly identifies a relationship between time pressures, 'cold' objectivity, and the reproduction of predetermined narratives in news journalism.

Ethnographic immersion, conversely, requires a prolonged period of inquiry. Actually, the temporal dimension itself regulates the degree to which immersion can be said to take place. Nevertheless, temporal differences 'do not invalidate basic overlaps between journalistic and ethnographic modes of translocal expertise and communication' (Boyer, 2010: 6). The temporal conditions, according to Bird (2005: 304), are not intrinsic to journalism but transcendable in an ethnographically informed practice. As Boynton (2005: xii–xv, 19–20) stresses, immersion journalism extends reporting time. In Conover's work, we see how, on one hand, he usually spends months or even a whole year immersed in a community. Yet, he tends to include news pegs, making his ethnographic endeavor journalistically justifiable: 'All of this seemed urgent because of what can be called America's incarceration crisis' (Conover, 2000 [2001]: 19). As such, 'urgency' becomes a vehicle for the ethnographic journalist to immerse himself into 'prison culture' for an entire year, bridging temporal aspects of journalism and ethnography.

### **Stylistic level**

Finally, two literary issues, distinguishing conventional journalistic prose from that of ethnography, must be negotiated: the presentation and arrangement of data and the use of technical terminology.

## Accessible prose

According to Singer (2009), ‘ethnography is both a process and a product, the writing is an integral component, a method of inquiry into author as well as topic’ (p. 192). This underscores the dialectic process of ethnography, but a similar fluid boundary between reporting (data collection) and writing (data mediation) is identified in Harrington’s (2003) description of ‘documentary literary journalism’ or ‘journalistic anthropology’. However, Harrington (2003) stresses, ‘[i]t is necessary to first ‘see’ the finished stories in your head [...] so you know what you must report to have what you need to build a particular story’ (p. 97). In other words, imagining the final prose precedes reporting which, in turn, precedes the writing process. Reversing the process in Figure 1, this is a somewhat opposite dialecticism from the one Singer and Bird have described. How such an approach is compatible with the prerogative to ‘override’ commonsense, in Harrington’s own words, remains unclear. Similarly unclear is Cramer and McDevitt’s (2004: 137) position that, through ethnography, the journalist must let the subjects be the true narrators of the story, reducing the reporter to merely a medium. This, obviously, collides with the explanatory and interpretative power of an ethnographic journalism, as outlined above – a paradox unaddressed in Cramer and McDevitt’s pioneer manual to ethnographic reporting.

However, Harrington (2003: 96–97) contrasts academic jargon to journalism’s commitment to plain and precise language, its active rather than passive voice, and vigilance as to words and grammar. This can be interpreted as both a commercial and a democratic concern for the literary quality, hence accessibility of the product. Jargon, as coded and excluding language, may obstruct ‘the linguistic preconditions for deeper democracy’ (Miller, 2000), i.e. enable public deliberation through the press. On the other hand, precise writing might inhibit careful representation. Again, ethnographic journalists are obliged to negotiate the dual risk of excluding the general public and hegemonizing their sources. These tensions extend to the composition of the narrative.

## Entertaining compositions

As we have seen, in the medley of ethnography and journalism, immersion is employed, at least partly, in order to entertain readers. Harrington (2003) holds, ‘[w]e pander to the needs of “story”. We do that because we are also entertainers’ (p. 101). This corresponds with his view that journalists should make the story dramatically coherent by looking for ‘action lines’ during reporting. It also corresponds with Conover’s (2014) reasoning for his decision to immerse himself:

Originality is an important element of storytelling. It’s true that, in certain ways, as a culture we tell the same stories over and over again. Nevertheless, if you’re setting out to write about prison, you have to think about what can I say that’s new, what can I learn that isn’t already known? What approach would be unusual or unique? And that’s the question that let me to think oh! Maybe I can learn about prison from the perspective of guards. Maybe that sort of counter-intuitive approach could be effective because they’re so reflexively dismissed as the enemy by most people who care about prison and I thought that would be interesting to examine. And I think in a lot of ways, it’s not the employees in a prison who are a problem it’s society that created this institution that forces certain people to act in certain ways.

For Conover, participant-observation is a means to a good story, which he equates with a good narrative. Thus, his methodology is driven by stylistic, rather than epistemic, concerns. Nevertheless, he conflates artistic uniqueness and objection to commonsense assumptions in mainstream media, negotiating traditional journalistic concerns with those of ethnography. Furthermore, while using ethnographic methods, he operates with parameters like conflict and change similar to those of conventional journalism:

Trouble is one of the great drives of narrative. I'm always looking for problems, for things going wrong, for people facing a challenge and negotiating it. Readers relate to individual people so I look for individual people who I treat as characters who solve problems or run into difficulties either alone or with each other or occasionally with me. And with the passage of time, we see the situation change. (Conover, 2014)

Such stylistic concerns have epistemic implications that are at odds with ethnographic concerns for community, continuity, and the quotidian as stressed by Cramer and McDevitt, Hannerz, and Singer. In ethnographic journalism, these methodological and epistemological prerogatives are negotiated with the need to gain readership.

## Journalism's micro-mechanisms

As this analysis suggests, condensing previous approaches to ethnographic journalism proves difficult because they are predominantly normative, and not empirical, because observers come out of different disciplines, and because there is no fundamental agreement as to what constitutes ethnography, let alone journalism (Zelizer, 2004: 23). Still, we see how employing ethnography impacts several registers of journalism on the epistemic as well as the strategic and the stylistic level. These registers, or micro-mechanisms, are outlined in Table 1, which provides a schema for comparing journalism practices holistically. As for ethnographic journalism, interpretation and immersion seem to be its essential features. Generally, ethnography appears to be employed journalistically out of strategic or stylistic concerns. In academia, methodology is determined by the nature of the inquiry, that is, questions operating on the epistemic level. In journalism, however, ethnography is imagined as a profoundly strategic device employed to produce fascinatingly unique content. Meanwhile, these practices, by necessity, supplant some epistemic tendencies of conventional journalism, most importantly objectivity and the unreflective reproduction of hegemonic beliefs.

From the analyses above, we can extract several signifiers, making a given account more journalistic or more ethnographic in terms of ideal types. Ethnographic journalism appears to move between these poles that, in reality, constitute continuums rather than dichotomies. As illustrated in Table 1, an ethnographic journalism operates on the *epistemic level* affecting the journalistic position, altering the norm of objectivity in favor of an interpretive approach, similar to other journalisms like MacDougall's interpretive journalism. Furthermore, the journalistic commitment, that is, focus, goals, and interests, moves from an event-driven preoccupation with conflict and rupture toward a holistic engagement with continuity and social structures similar to, for instance, precision journalism. And rather than cultural reproduction, taking previous media frames as

**Table 1.** Epistemic, strategic, and stylistic micro-mechanisms of journalism and ethnography as ideal types.

Level	Issue	Impulse	
		Journalistic	Ethnographic
Epistemic	Position	Objective Facts	Interpretive Meaning
	Commitment	Event-driven Conflict/change	Holistic Continuity
	Poïesis	Cultural reproduction Archive	Countering commonsense Theory
	Scope	Angle Fixed focus Linear	Context Flexible focus Dialectic
Strategic	Role	Narrator Detached Skeptical Loyal to public	Partaker Immersed Empathetic Loyal to interlocutors
	Temporality	Short term Limited inquiry	Long term Open-ended inquiry
	Prose	Structuring data Entertaining	Structured by data Informing
	Language	Accessible Inclusive Plain	Jargon Exclusive Complex
Stylistic	Narrative	Dramatic	Systematic

the starting point and replicating them through linear research, journalism can counter commonsense by informing its inquiry theoretically and making it dialectic. This may alter the poïesis of the press, i.e. the structuring labor of its basic assumptions.

On the *strategic level*, an ethnographic journalism broadens the scope of inquiry by catering to context and balancing an angled approach with a more flexible focus. The role of reporters – their relationship to the issue at hand, their sense of responsibility, and their attitude – changes from a detached, skeptical narrator to an immersed and empathetic observer, similar to, for instance, intimate journalism and public journalism. Similarly, the temporal scope of research, with the infusion of ethnography, signifies a long-term rather than a prompt project.

On the *stylistic level*, the ethnographic journalist must negotiate a concern for literary quality, accessibility, and entertainment, similar to genres like literary and new journalism, with complex and precise representation of ethnographic evidence. Similarly, the composition of the text has to negotiate the dramatic narratives of journalism with the systematic form of ethnography.

Although the employment of immersion strategies is a dominant characteristic of ethnographic journalism, it seems stimulated by strategies for ‘getting the story’ (Peterson,

2010) rather than by idealistic or epistemic concerns for the extraction of adequate and accurate data. This is in keeping with journalism research describing 'story ideation' and 'news philosophy' as decisively market-driven (Becker and Vlad, 2009: 66). However, the ethnographic method itself appears to guide story ideation as well. This corresponds to Pedelty's (2010) claim that ethnographic journalists maintain a double ambition 'both recognizing the exigencies of the market and attempting to expand space for critical inquiry'. Such ambitions make ethnographic journalism distinct from previous innovative genres. It resembles precision journalism in its employment of academic methods, but utilizes the inherent overlaps between *qualitative* methods and journalistic craftsmanship rather than focusing on statistics. New journalism and public journalism emerged from concerns with literary quality and representation, respectively. The present analysis suggests that ethnographic journalism has profound affinities with both these genres in terms of public inclusion and expressive distinctiveness. This corresponds to observations by Emmanuelle Gatien who identifies ethnographic journalism as an emerging standard of excellence in French journalism.

Boynton (2005) describes a *New New Journalism*, including the work of reporters like Conover, Leon Dash, and Alex Kotlowich, as a practice applying the form of new journalism to the social and political concerns of turn-of-the-century journalists like Jacob Riis, who dedicated his work to better the living conditions for impoverished New Yorkers. But while these norms are evident in ethnographic journalism, they appear to be dependent upon the introduction of particular methods. Ethnographic journalism seems to emerge from the space in-between epistemology and style, that is, methodology: the usefulness of immersion strategies themselves. Consequently, ethnographic journalism signifies the employment of immersion strategies for publication purposes. These strategies, however, propel the progression of journalistic epistemology toward critical scholarship disposing, to some extent, of norms of mainstream journalism that have been heavily critiqued in journalistic scholarship, like objectivity.

The remaining question is how to distinguish ethnographic journalism. What defines it appears to be the blurring of the impulses outlined above creating divergent and dynamic hybrids. As none of these signifiers appear exclusive to or decisive for an ethnographic journalism, producing an accurate taxonomy proves difficult. Yet, we may simply appreciate that the slippage between genres offers sites for examining journalism's ongoing normative negotiations.

## **Cultural diversity and contextual reporting**

We might also contemplate what kind of journalistic stage ethnographic journalism as a 'hot moment' reflects. At least two separate circumstances seem to speak to the vocalization of an ethnographic genre in journalism: the rise of multiculturalism and 'contextualized reporting', respectively. According to Fink and Schudson (2014: 7), the second half of 20th century brought a decrease in conventional, 'just the facts' journalism and a vast increase in 'contextual reporting'. Analyzing 1891 articles, they document how, in 2005, contextual reporting accounted for close to half of all stories. Noting the essential place of 'social empathy stories' in this trend, Fink and Schudson (2014) describe the replacement of conventional, adversarial reporting by 'a more intellectually ambitious journalism. It is

a more “featurized” journalism with front-page stories of a contextual cast’ (p. 15). Such a trend divulges the need for reporting strategies that integrate descriptive and interpretative registers.

The same can be said for a challenge coming from more general social structures. Multiculturalism, while a predicate for specific ideologies, is also a descriptive term for the fact of cultural diversity in a society. News evolves in moments of breaches in commonsense and ‘[t]his use of pre-existing cultural frames will inevitably tend toward cultural reproduction’ (Peterson, 2001: 203, 207–208). ‘Objective facts’ in journalism are, in fact, determined by dominant commonsense (Deuze, 2005: 453; Peterson, 2001: 201, 209; Tuchman, 1972: 674). So while objective reporting may have been less problematic in times of strong cultural and social cohesion, it is poorly suited to account for precisely the cultural differences that a responsible, representative press can be expected to engage with:

[O]ne can be content with ‘giving the facts’ where there are generally accepted rules for interpreting the facts and an agreed set of political values and purposes. Today no accepted system for interpretation exists and political values and purposes are very much in contention. (Carey, 1997b: 139–140)

Such diversity, according to Deuze (2005: 454), forces practitioners to face objectivity and rethink it. Multiculturalism challenges perceptions of the role and function of journalism as a whole, forcing journalism to continuously reinvent itself (Deuze, 2005: 447, 453). Ethnographic reporting seems to be one such response since it profoundly disturbs the objectivity paradigm otherwise identified with journalism. As evident from the analysis above, cultural, as well as subcultural, sensitivity emerges from specific reporting strategies. In turn, such techniques can destabilize hegemonizing and marginalizing effects of the press (Sewell, 1999: 56).

But while these social changes challenge established norms and values of journalists, journalistic responses challenge our assumptions, as media scholars, about journalism itself. They exhibit journalism as not a coherent ideology but a socially structured interpretive practice (Peterson, 2001). We may imagine journalism holistically as processes of cognition, a concept that conjoins attention, memory, reasoning, producing and understanding language, learning, problem solving, and decision-making. If we think of journalism as cognition, we see how it constitutes a faculty for processing information, applying knowledge, and changing preferences, within the profession and within society at large. Deuze (2005) stresses, ‘[i]t is by studying how journalists from all walks of their professional life negotiate the core values that one can see the occupational ideology of journalism at work’ (p. 458). Ethnographic journalism as one professional path is, evidently, a window into such negotiations.

## Conclusion

This article sought to account for ‘ethnographic journalism’ as a critical incident that negotiates the normative boundaries of journalistic practices. While journalism has long shared a kinship with ethnography, this relationship is now explicitly aired. In challenging epistemic, strategic, and stylistic registers of conventional journalism, ethnographic



journalism holds a critique of traditional journalistic objectivity, assumptions, detachment, and scope – if not for the sake of compassion and inclusion, then as a means of originality in the service of storytelling and, subsequently, readership. Based on the analyses of fragmented approaches to this genre, ethnographic journalism can be – albeit loosely – defined as the employment of immersion strategies adopted from social sciences for literary and ultimately commercial purposes. These stylistic and strategic practices, however, propel the transgression of conventional journalistic epistemology toward critical scholarship. This should not be surprising if we consider Bourdieu's concept of habitus.

The scope of this practice remains an important question for future research and is beyond the limits of this article, which has aimed to provide a platform for further empirical studies. Such research is critical since this genre corresponds with or responds to contemporary challenges and changes in journalism at large – predominantly the lack of cultural and social cohesion and the rise of contextual reporting. While offering one approach to an 'intellectually ambitious' journalism, the genre accounts for precisely the cultural differences that 'responsible reporting', historically, was imagined to mediate, if not mitigate. Furthermore, ethnographic journalism constitutes a challenge not only to naturalized journalistic conventions but also to the scholarly conception of journalism as a coherent professional ideology. Rather, we may contemplate contemporary journalisms as divergent processes of cognition, which themselves are made up of changing philosophical, practical, and expressional parts.

### **Acknowledgements**

The author would like to thank Michael Schudson and Peter Bro for their insightful and helpful comments.

### **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Funding**

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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