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Researching media through practices: an ethnographic approach

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Abstract
Anthropological and ethnographic research on media has been largely focused on analyzing reception of media products (television, radio, press and film) and media consumption related to domestic appropriation of technologies (Rothenbuhler *et al.,* 2005). There is also a wide body of research devoted to the study of the political dimension of alternative and indigenous media (Ginsburg, 2002). However, there has been a separation between media and internet studies, and between the analysis of media reception and practices of self-production, such as family photography or home video. Current digital media practices urge reexamination of self-produced content and media flows from a broader perspective that cuts across divisions between public and private, corporative media products and people's releases, home production and cultural industry, political activism and domestic affairs.

Keywords
media, producers, cultural practices, ethnographic research

Resum
La recerca antropològica i etnogràfica dels *media* s'ha centrat en gran part en l'anàlisi de la recepció dels productes dels mitjans tradicionals (televisió, ràdio, premsa escrita i pel·lícules) i el consum relacionat amb l'apropiació domèstica de tecnologies (Rothenbuhler *et al*., 2005). També hi ha un ampli corpus de recerca dedicat a l'estudi de la dimensió política dels mitjans alternatius i indígenes (Ginsburg *et al*., 2002). Tanmateix, hi ha hagut una separació entre els estudis dels *media* i els estudis d'internet, i entre l'anàlisi de la recepció i les pràctiques d'autoproducció, com ara la fotografia familiar o el vídeo domèstic. Les pràctiques actuals en relació amb els mitjans digitals insten a reexaminar els continguts i els fluxos d'autoproducció amb una perspectiva més àmplia que difumina la frontera entre el que és públic i el que és privat, productes realitzats per corporacions i productes *amateurs*, producció domèstica i indústria cultural, activisme polític i vida quotidiana.

Paraules clau
mitjans, *media*, productors, pràctiques culturals, recerca etnogràfica

This monographic issue of *Digithum* gathers some of the most relevant contributions presented by young scholars to the workshop Media Practices and Cultural Producers, which took place in Barcelona in November 2008, an event marked by an intense exchange of experiences, methodologies and theoretical approaches to Media Studies.

The main objective of the workshop was to explore ways of doing ethnographic research on current media practices and their implications for the understanding of people's interaction with media. As an introduction to this monographic issue, we will present some of the main subjects highlighted by the keynote speakers' presentations – Dorle Drackle, Don Slater, Nick Couldry and Elizabeth Bird –, connecting them to the topics of the papers that will follow in this issue.

Who are the *cultural producers?*

Traditionally, Media Studies have centered their analysis on the formal aspects of text production and content. Later, theories of reception examined the way that text is "consumed" and received, focusing on how people appropriate and resignify the text, moving further from the Frankfurt School, which gives little choice to the audience for responding to the hegemonic discourses of institutional apparatuses. Recent Media Studies propose to look at current media convergence and social media on the internet as a way of empowering people and situate individual discourses at the same level as cultural industries and pubic institutions (Jenkins, 2008). The question is: what are the implications of understanding audiences as cultural producers? Are self-production and content sharing new cultural forms of media production? What are the cultural implications of people's media productive practices?

Dorle Drackle opened the workshop by challenging the term *cultural producers* as a way of understanding people's interactions with media. She argued that cultural producer describes what people do with digital technologies in terms of "content production" and "joining social networks"; a flat description that involves a cultural industry perspective and identifying people as audience or consumers, and people's products as commodities, seeing their activity as alienated or confronted with mass media hegemony. She claims that *producing* does not take into account other people's activities related to digital technologies, such as being presented to others, acting as mediators between worlds, acquiring literacy skills, being a social entrepreneur, connecting with friends and family, engaging people in common goals, bringing electricity to an isolated village as technological developers, relating people with artifacts and political issues, etc. All these activities are not understandable in the "classical" or "critical" paradigm of Media Studies. They might be better understood in terms of *cultural mediation*, understanding *mediation* in the sense of transformative practices (Latour, 2008). Digital technologies are not passive intermediaries, but actants that are put into work in very different ways, creating heterogeneous networks and processes of cultural mediation, so people engaged with those networks' in-between activities could be better defined as *cultural mediators.*

As an ethnographic contribution to this topic of cultural mediation linked to social media activism, Virginia Melián discusses in this issue how the internet potentially enhances new social movements through the creation of alternative spaces for political action. Mellian explores the possibilities of networking on a global basis and the tensions between local, national and global forms of civil engagement through media production in the case of a social movement opposed to the installation of two mega paper mills on the border between Argentina and Uruguay. Media production engagement must be understood in relation to citizenship commitment and local activities that cannot be reduced to "cultural consumption".

In dialogue with Drackle's and Melián's understanding, an alternative view of online activism is found in Veronica Barassi's ethnographic research on how traditional trade union organizations in Britain cope with internet for their solidarity campaigns. Her data questions the fact that social activism and alternative Media Studies have not explored the challenges and frustrations people encounter in the everyday use of internet technologies for political action.

Disarticulating media and digital technology narratives

Don Slater discussed the main question of studies of the "impact" of ICTs on society and how they help or not to reduce poverty (see also Slater *et al.,* 2002). The idea was to reveal the narratives that involve development policy programs, arguing that such narratives are based on unequal North/South relations in which the North brings the theories and the South provides the data. The problem is then what are the "best practices of technology introduction" without questioning the narratives that articulate North/South relations and the "global" narratives of the so-called *information society.* He argues that the notion of *media* does not provide a sturdy frame for the study of people's worlds, as it carries with it the presupposition that media is the same in different cultural contexts. We must search for an analytical symmetry to disarticulate the language of legitimation of policies based upon the impact of ICTs in society. This has to be based upon an analytic language different from these performative narratives. *The media* is a Western term (Raymond Williams, 2003), it has to do with urbanization, with producer/consumer relations and also a political agenda. Instead of speaking about media, it might be better to speak about *communicative practices* or *communicative ecology*, understanding it as the whole structure of communication and information flows in people's ways of

life. The question then is: what are people assembling to make communication happen? And to look at the mundane *bricolage*, routines and stabilizations, to seek the actors know-how and to understand ecology as an orchestration of spaces. We must depart from studies that only measure the impact of determinate media in people's life or the frequency of exposure to it. Thus, he argues for an ethnographic research strategy with a conceptual reformulation of communication technology that eludes the topics of Western narratives to open an array of new possibilities to understand people's communicative ecology in different contexts and settings.

Tori Holmes explores, along these lines, the conceptual framework and methodological tools needed for studying the use of the internet in the favelas (shantytowns) of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Starting from the notion of *local content* and user-generated content, she argues that "digital divide" research has neglected informal, organic online interactions by non-elite groups on the internet (such as discussion forums or chat), and that viewing these as less political, less social, or less relevant has perpetuated a Western vision of the media. Following Slater, local content and internet use are also part of local "communicative ecologies". Communicative ecologies include not only media but also transport systems and networks. Mapping communicative ecologies therefore involves mapping people, practices, and places. Holmes also explores the implications of understanding media as practice proposed by Couldry (2004).

Media practices and "the media"

Two of our keynote speakers approached the very conceptualization of *media practices*. Nick Couldry defines media practices as the open set of practices relating to, or oriented around media. He does not think that we must depart from "media" studies, but go further in developing media theory in a way that overcomes "media-centrism" and the collapse of media research after the current pluralization of media interfaces and trajectories. In his speech during the workshop, he urged for a search for new descriptive languages proposing to think of media as practice. He explained during the workshop that he initially had proposed to think of media from a theory of practice perspective (Schatzki *et al.*), but not to propose the concept of *media practice* as such, which has been so successful, indeed. Media as practice means to decenter text and media institutions – which claim to be "the" media – from the core of the scene and to look at what people do with media or do and say related to media. To study media as practice means, for example, to study a practice such as "keeping up with the news" and to look for the articulations and disarticulation of this practice with other practices such as "political engagement". It also implies looking at how media is crossing different fields of activity, for example, professional health systems, and which things are done through media and how. This new perspective promotes an expansion of the research field and new research questions related to how social orders emerge from practices.

For Elizabeth Bird, the question was how "the media" is incorporated into everyday communicative and cultural practices, such as popular rituals like weddings (Bird, 2003). She proposed to look at people's everyday life and how media scripts and genres permeate cultural practices, from special occasions to mundane moments. Like Mark Hobart (2009), she argues that we should focus on "media-related practices" rather than people's media responses and to analyze "mediated practices" and "mediated moments": how ritual and significant life moments are performed like media products, shaped by media scripts, forms or genres, and how moments of trivial life become "media content", as in the cases of popular YouTube celebrities "I like turtles" or "Don't tase me, Bro!". Our popular cultures, she argues, are interwoven with media scripts and texts. In "media-saturated" cultural contexts, cultural production cannot be explained by a clear division between producers and audiences.

Two papers from the dossier deal with the interwoven practices of media production and consumption. Bruno Campanella presents an ethnographic research on an online fan community of the Brazilian *Big Brother* focusing not only on the text reception, but also on the study of the "culture of the everyday" of this virtual environment. He shows that "audiencing" also involves cultural production, the emergence of an online community solidly shaped by a sort of social order and the articulation of cultural values and social norms around the narratives presented by the reality show, thus following Bird's notion of *mediated practices*. While Campanella examines cultural consumption, Rianne Subijanto explores ethnographically media production and the role of Islam in cultural, political and social transformation in contemporary society in Indonesia. Her work shows the interrelation of religious practices with the practices of television series production, not only regarding the final product but also – and maybe even more important – in the everyday routine of production, connected to the main actors' way of life.

Finally, we want to express our gratitude to all the participants of the workshop and to all the contributors whose papers could not be published in the dossier because of the limitations of space and schedule. All contributed to the exploration of the circulatory flows of media practices and, in particular, how digital technology development, use and appropriation is changing media culture, cultures of media circulation and the very definition of *cultural producer*.

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