JOURNALISTICA
2025, pp. 267-272
https://doi.org/10.7146/journalistica.v19i1.159742

Ethnographic reporting: immersion as journalistic practice and pedagogy

Journalistica: The Methods Section

In this section, Journalistica puts a spotlight on research methods used in journalism studies and/or journalism practice.

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KEYWORDS
ethnographic journalism, immersion, participant observation, journalism methods, reflexivity

1. Description of the method

Ethnographic reporting is a journalistic approach rooted in immersion, participant observation, and co-presence. It borrows tools from anthropology, yet the purposes of ethnography in journalism and in research are not the same. Whereas academic ethnography seeks to build theory and contribute to scholarly knowledge, ethnographic journalism aims to create vivid, empathetic accounts that help audiences understand lives and worlds beyond their own. This means reporters "go deep" into people's lived experiences, spending extended time with sources, inhabiting their environments, and interpreting meaning through detailed observation and participation (Conover, 2016). Ethnographic reporting challenges conventional notions of objectivity and offers a more engaged, layered way of understanding and portraying people's lives. Unlike conventional reporting, which often pursues facts and answers through interviews and statements, ethnographic journalism embraces *thick description* (Geertz, 1973), personal involvement, and inductive discovery. It is less about extracting facts and more about interpreting lived experience — through a combination of being there, seeing with, and writing from within.

Rather than "parachuting in" to cover a story, the ethnographic reporter enters the environment of their subject over time, participating where appropriate, observing continuously, and letting the story emerge inductively. The goal is to understand how people see themselves and navigate their worlds. Ethnographic journalism is not about the view from above, but the view from among — privileging how people understand their own actions, identities, and social worlds. The method also implies a critical awareness of the journalist's own role, acknowledging positionality and potential biases. In that sense, ethnographic journalism is not only a method but a critical rethinking of the very foundations of journalistic objectivity, authorship, and narrative voice (Hermann, 2016, 2024).

Step-by-step guide

Ethnographic reporting can feel daunting especially given the time and access it requires. But even short-term engagements can benefit from its mindset and method. This simplified step-by-step approach helps guide the process:

Before: entering the field

Choose a site or group not simply based on newsworthiness, but on curiosity, social relevance, or personal intrigue. Conover (2016: 33) suggests starting with what confuses, annoys, or fascinates you.

Build access slowly. Identify gatekeepers, be transparent about your role (or strategically ambiguous, depending on context), and begin forming relationships.

Do background reading but stay open. Ethnographic reporting depends on inductive thinking: going in without fixed hypotheses.

During: in the field

Observe and participate: Take notes on interactions, behaviors, environments, silences, routines. Participate where ethically appropriate, not to act but to better understand.

Be aware of power: Your presence may alter behavior. Instead of ignoring this, reflect on it. Include yourself in the context as observer, participant, and interpreter.

Attend to the insider perspective: Ethnographic reporting must foreground how people see themselves; their customs, contradictions, aspirations, and explanations. Your job is not to label or explain them, but to amplify how they make sense of their lives.

Keep a field journal: Record your observations, reflections, and feelings. This helps track your evolving understanding and provides narrative material later (Conover, 2016: 81).

After: storytelling and representation

Organize around themes, not chronology or preconceived angles.

Include your positionality: How did your presence shape the material? What biases shaped your view? This isn't self-indulgence — it's methodological transparency.

Let the voices in: Quote generously and faithfully. Allow people to speak in their own terms while still situating them in narrative and context.

Review ethically: Where possible, let subjects review how they're represented, not necessarily for approval, but for dialogue and correction (Cramer & McDevitt, 2004).

2. Examples from journalism and the classroom

In a university setting, Cramer and McDevitt (2004) describe a powerful example where journalism students conducted a project on homelessness and panhandling. Rather than simply report on the issue, they analyzed existing media coverage, engaged directly with people experiencing homelessness, and in some cases lived in similar conditions for a day. Their resulting stories were then shared and discussed with the very community they reported on, turning journalism into dialogue, not just publication.

In my own teaching at the master's level, I introduce students to a downscaled version of ethnographic journalism adapted to the time and resource constraints of the classroom. While classical ethnographic journalism projects might take months or even years often culminating in books, long-form features, or documentaries, we don't have that kind of time. Instead, students work within shorter timeframes and toward more modest formats: a written article, a short video, or an audio vignette.

Despite these constraints, the essential principles of ethnographic journalism remain intact. Students begin with mini field observations in everyday public spaces such as cafés, laundromats, library reading rooms, or bus routes. They are tasked with noticing the rhythms, interactions, and social codes of these environments through quiet, systematic observation. As the course progresses, they move into more structured micro-ethnographies, focusing on

a specific group or recurring setting such as dog walkers in a local park, food delivery workers, or late-night convenience store staff. Over the course of several days or weeks, they return to the same setting repeatedly to observe, interact, participate and gradually build a more layered understanding of the people and practices involved.

What this scaled-down approach offers is a practical and accessible way to develop ethnographic sensibilities. Students learn to slow down, suspend judgment, and attune themselves to detail — skills that can deepen their reporting in any journalistic context. They also practice reflexivity, keeping field journals and discussing how their background and presence shape the story. While the results may not be book-length or exhaustive, they often reveal overlooked perspectives and foster meaningful encounters. Even a brief immersion, if done thoughtfully, can yield richer, more empathetic stories than fast interviews or vox pops. In that sense, this adapted method becomes a valuable tool not only for classroom learning, but for the future practice of journalism itself.

3. Main advantages and challenges of using the method

Ethnographic reporting offers several distinct strengths. It allows journalists to represent communities more accurately and empathetically, moving beyond quick interviews and surface-level portrayals. By spending extended time in a given environment, reporters can uncover underlying dynamics that are often hidden from the news agenda, producing work that resonates with both audiences and sources. At the same time, the method encourages reflexivity, as journalists are pushed to reflect on their own role and influence, thereby strengthening trust and transparency in the reporting process.

Yet these advantages are counterbalanced by clear challenges. Immersion requires time and continuity, which often conflict with the fast-paced rhythms of newsroom production. Ethical dilemmas around power, access, and representation are intensified when relationships with sources extend over longer periods, and journalists must carefully balance involvement with independence. Finally, the method can be emotionally demanding, particularly for students or early-career reporters who are stepping into unfamiliar social settings. These challenges underscore that ethnographic reporting is both rewarding and demanding, requiring patience, ethical awareness, and resilience.

4. Relevance for journalism studies

Ethnographic reporting is relevant not only as a practice but as a critique of journalistic norms. It questions the myth of neutrality and reframes objectivity as transparency and responsibility. As Anne Kirstine Hermann (2016: p. 263) argues, it offers a genre with epistemic, strategic, and stylistic dimensions: it alters how journalists know, how they act, and how they communicate to an audience.

In journalism studies, it bridges theory and practice. It can be read alongside qualitative research, anthropology, and literary nonfiction offering students and scholars a way to investigate journalism as a social encounter, not just a profession.

5. Ethical considerations

Immersion blurs lines. Should the reporter reveal their identity upfront? What happens when relationships deepen over time? What if the journalist witnesses illegal activity, or starts to empathize too strongly with one side?

Conover (2016) reflects candidly on these dilemmas, describing situations where full transparency might close doors, or where withdrawal might feel like betrayal. Cramer and McDevitt emphasize the importance of verification through dialogue, where sources have a say in how their lives are represented (2004: p. 136). In classrooms, we must create space for students to process their ethical uncertainties and learn how to navigate power dynamics without reducing people to story material.

Ultimately, ethnographic journalism offers both reporters and students a way to move beyond surface narratives and engage more deeply with the people and environments they cover. Whether pursued over months or condensed into a classroom project, the method fosters curiosity, empathy, and a sharpened awareness of how meaning is made — not just by journalists, but by those whose lives journalists seek to represent.

6. Further readings

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